

From the Inside: A Qualitative Study of Counsellors' Experiences of Working in Prisons

"A little bit of humanity goes a long way."

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Counselling at the University of Canterbury*

by Susan Panckhurst

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x

Abstract

This qualitative study sought to explore the experiences of counsellors' working in prisons, with an aim to discovering what drew them to the work, what they expected it to be like and what the reality of the experience was. The four participants were all counsellors currently working one-to-one with inmates in prisons in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Rich and detailed data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed using narrative thematic analysis. Three key themes were identified as participants shared their personal narrative: working within the prison context, aspects of the counselling work that are specific to working in a prison and the counsellor's personal journey. Detailed descriptions of the themes and the participants' personal stories are reviewed in relation to existing literature. The findings show that counselling work in prisons is challenging and very different to counselling in a normal setting. The participants were passionate about their work and had strong opinions on how prisons were organised and what they offered inmates.

There is a large amount of literature pertaining to the challenges of working in a prison and limited literature concerning why people choose to work in prison, how they experience it and the rewards associated with the work. This study adds to that literature. Implications for practice and recommendations for further research are also included.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This study seeks to explore the experiences of counsellors who work in prisons. The purpose of this narrative study is to discover what draws counsellors to work in prisons, what they expect it will be like and what their experienced reality is. The hope is that the knowledge generated from this research will give new insights into prison work and how counsellors perceive it.

Within prisons in New Zealand, very little one-to-one counselling occurs. The Department of Corrections, who run the eighteen prisons in New Zealand (Department of Corrections [DoC], n.d./2017), employ psychologists to facilitate group programmes and mental health clinicians to work with inmates with mild to moderate mental health needs (Azuela, 2013). Just recently, the Department of Corrections have employed counsellors to work in the four women's prisons in New Zealand. Usually, counsellors working in prisons are either employed by outside agencies or work voluntarily.

The topic of prisons and crime in New Zealand is a controversial one which has frequently become a dominant political issue, particularly around election times. Public views around crime and imprisonment are often focused on serious violent crimes which are portrayed, and sometimes sensationalised, in the media. Media driven panic has stoked fear and some of the public respond by calling for tougher sentencing and harsher punishments. Prisoner advocacy and support is not popular with some members of the public and interest groups like the Sensible Sentencing Trust. However, there are groups set up to support prisoners

and their families, such as, Prisoners Aid and Rehabilitation Society, Pillars and the Howard League. These groups take into account the needs of prisoners and their families and support them in various ways with the aim of reducing recidivism and lowering prison populations in New Zealand. The debate around how our prisons operate and whether they should be places of punishment or rehabilitation is an important one as statistics show that our current system is not working. The data supporting this claim will be outlined in chapter two.

Strongman, in her newspaper article about what is happening in New Zealand prisons, states that:

More than three quarters of prisoners have been victims of violence and about 65 percent have low literacy and numeracy skills. More than half are Māori. Prisoners are more likely to have come from poverty. They have addiction problems - alcohol, meth - and they struggle with mental health issues like post-traumatic stress disorder. 90 percent of people who go to prison before they turn 20 will have prior involvement with New Zealand's child state care agency, and 15 to 24-year-olds make up about forty percent of arrests in New Zealand. (2018)

It is statistics like this that sparked my interest in prisons, who goes and why? Since doing a psychology degree many years ago I have been interested in the Nature vs Nurture debate. I have always believed that humans are inherently good and are shaped by their environment (although, this theory was challenged slightly when I had four children of my own). This belief led to my sympathetic approach towards people who had a rough start in life and

went on to offend, ending up in prison. During my six years at University completing my Masters in Counselling, I have worked as a counsellor in a high school, a counselling centre and at a men's prison. I found the prison work the most interesting and the most rewarding. I was surprised and disappointed at the lack of one-to-one counselling available to inmates and feel very strongly that there should be more. I have seen the benefit my clients have got from our work together. I believe this is an important issue and one that warrants investigating.

My original idea for this research was to interview prisoners who had worked one-to-one with a counsellor while in prison, to hear their stories and experiences of the counselling process. I soon discovered it would be very hard, if not impossible, to get ethics approval for this and there would be problems recording interviews as no phones or recording devices are allowed onsite at prisons. A more feasible approach has been to interview counsellors to hear their stories and experiences of working in prisons. This was driven by personal interest to discover what their motivation was and what the reality of the work was like for them. I believed this could be helpful for other counsellors considering similar work while also raising awareness of the issues with New Zealand prisons and the need for increased counselling services in prisons. There is a part of me as well which wanted to fly the flag for prison inmates and their plight. Some of the stories I have heard from my clients are heart-breaking. I have met some very kind, personable and talented individuals in my work who, through circumstances beyond their control and horrific past trauma, have made poor choices which have resulted in them ending up in prison. I felt sure other counsellors would have had similar experiences and I was interested to hear their stories.

As seen in the next chapter, there is very little literature about counsellors' experiences of working in prisons and next to none on what draws them to the work. My rationale for conducting this study was to add to the minimal research on counsellors' experiences of working in prisons. In order to address this, the following research question was used:

What draws counsellors to work in prisons and how does their experienced reality match their expectations?

This study is presented in six chapters, the first being the introduction, chapter two reviews literature relevant to the topic and chapter three outlines the methods and methodology employed. The next chapter, four, presents the findings of the research; following on from that, chapter five gives an analysis of the findings and the final chapter provides a summary, implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

Definition of key terms used in this research

This research specifically concerns the experiences of counsellors and I have used the words 'counsellor' and 'participant' throughout this research to refer to the study subjects. The four participants I interviewed are all qualified counsellors. Counsellors can also be called 'therapists', to minimise confusion, I have refrained from using that term in this study.

In the literature, people in prison are referred to as 'prisoners', 'offenders' or 'inmates'.

Because the inmates referred to in this research are clients of the counsellors, I have chosen to call them 'clients'. This was a conscious decision as I think it is more respectful, and from my own experience when I am working with a client, it is irrelevant whether they are a

prisoner or not. At times, the word inmate is used and this is when referring to someone who is in prison but not necessarily engaged in counselling.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The overall focus of this research project is to co-construct personal narratives with counsellors who are working or who have worked in a counselling role in a prison in New Zealand. It explores their backgrounds, their expectations of their chosen career and their experiences. The following literature review explores research pertaining counselling in New Zealand and in New Zealand prisons, what it is like to work in a prison environment, working with clients in prison and the personal journey of counsellors working in prisons.

Counselling

Counselling is essentially about behaviour, emotional expression and ways of thinking. The fundamental aim is to understand oneself as that relates to relationship building, growth and development and emotional awareness (Durie, 2007).

On their website, the New Zealand Association of Counsellors define counselling as:

Counselling is the process of helping and supporting a person to resolve personal, social, or psychological challenges and difficulties. A professional and well-trained counsellor helps clients to see things more clearly, possibly from a different viewpoint, and supports clients to focus on feelings, experiences or behaviour that will facilitate positive change. (2018)

Counselling in New Zealand

This research was conducted in New Zealand, with all participants working in prisons in New Zealand at the time of being interviewed, therefore, it is pertinent to look into the history of counselling in New Zealand. New Zealand's British colonial heritage had an influence on the nature of counselling in New Zealand. Miller and Furbish (2015) argue that despite the fact that the country's counselling field has been heavily influenced by theory and practices originating overseas, New Zealand's unique context has resulted in a locally influenced application of counselling. Counselling in New Zealand has developed from several professional origins, for example, psychology, education and social work (Patton, 2009 as cited in Miller & Furbish, 2015) although, unlike in the United Kingdom and the United States, most New Zealand counsellors do not have psychology qualifications. In New Zealand in the 1960's, the government formally established and funded guidance and counselling in all secondary schools (Ero; *Guidance and Counselling in Schools*, 2013), employing one counsellor for every 200 pupils. The majority of counsellors in New Zealand are employed in the education sector, and the rest, mainly in social agencies and private practice (Miller & Furbish, 2015).

New Zealand prisons

The Department of Corrections statistics show that, as of September 30th 2018, there were 10,052 people locked up in 18 prisons throughout New Zealand. Of these 10,052 prisoners, 92.7% or 9,319 were men and 7.3% or 733 were women. This number has risen at an alarming rate over the last 40 years. In the 1970's and early 1980's prisoner numbers remained relatively stable at around 2,600, however, since 1985, this number has more

than tripled (Johnston, 2016). In her report entitled *"Beyond the Prison Gate"*, Johnston states that this fact is not due to an increasing crime rate but rather to changes in key pieces of legislation relating to changes in bail law, sentencing and parole. It is common knowledge that prison is an extremely expensive way of dealing with crime, it costs around \$100,000 to keep someone in prison for a year in New Zealand (Clayworth, 2012). Current recidivism rates show that 70% of prisoners reoffend within two years of being released from prison and 52% return to prison within five years (Department of Corrections [DoC], n.d./2017). The prison system in New Zealand has been the subject of much debate for the last decade. Put simply, there seems to be two schools of thought on the issue, those who believe we need harsher sentences for people who commit crimes and those who believe that prison is not an effective way of dealing with crime. Whichever school of thought you belong to, there surely must be one thing which can be agreed upon – rising imprisonment and recidivism rates indicate that the present system is not working.

Māori in New Zealand prisons

Following on from the notion that there is a problem with the present system is the fact that Māori are hugely over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice process in New Zealand. Māori make up 51% of the prison population and only 12.5% of the country's total population. Statistics for women are even worse with 60% of women in prison in New Zealand being of Māori descent (Clayworth, 2012). Māori also have the highest rate of reoffending compared with the total population (Nakhid & Shorter, 2014). Nakhid and Shorter discuss the idea that there are two approaches to explain the disproportionate representation of Māori in criminal justice statistics. The first being that police apprehend more Māori than other ethnicities for similar offences. Furthermore, levels of

disproportionality are recorded in prosecutions, convictions, sentencing and reconviction figures also. The second approach is that Māori are at greater risk of ending up in patterns of adult criminal conduct due to larger proportion of Māori in lower socio-economic groups, higher rates of unemployment, the ongoing effects of urbanisation and the impact of gang culture (Clayworth, 2012). Whatever the reason, the statistics are worrying and I believe it is a societal issue that needs to be addressed by the whole country, not just Māori. Looking into the negative effects of colonisation is an issue beyond the scope of this study.

Addressing mental health in New Zealand prisons

In 2016, Indig, Gear and Wilhelm conducted research in New Zealand, on behalf of the Department of Corrections, and discovered that prisoners have considerably more issues with both mental health and substance abuse disorders than the general population. In fact, they stated that 91% of prisoners had been diagnosed with a mental health and/or substance use disorder over their lifetime (Frame-Reid and Thurston, 2013). These findings evidenced an urgent need for increased mental health services within prisons. In mid 2016, Corrections secured funding to launch four pilot initiatives to be delivered over a two-year period (Azuela, 2013). In her article outlining these initiatives, Azuela described these schemes as:

1. Improving mental health service through placing mental health clinicians (registered nurses, psychologists, or occupational therapists) in 16 prisons and four community corrections sites to work with prisoners.
2. Wrap around family/whānau support services.
3. A supported living service, in the form of transitional temporary community accommodation.

4. Employing counsellors and social workers to work in women's prisons.

This research is concerned with counsellors' experiences of working in prisons. None of the participants were employed by Corrections. Corrections only employ counsellors to work in the four women's prisons across New Zealand. Counsellors working in prisons in New Zealand are either voluntary, employed by Accident Compensation Corporation to work with victims of sexual abuse or employed by a District Health Board, through Primary Mental Health, to deliver short term 'packages of care' counselling to those with mild to moderate mental illness.

Rehabilitation vs punishment

Should prisons be places of rehabilitation or punishment? This is a wide and continuing social debate. Some maintain that prisons are too soft and that the answer to lowering the crime rate is tougher sentences and harsher conditions for inmates. Others believe that prison is not an effective way of dealing with crime and results would be better if more resources were put into rehabilitation (Clayworth, 2012). Considering the apparent success rates of Scandinavian prison systems, it seems obvious that more resources be put into rehabilitation. It is impressive how prisons operate in Scandinavian countries where imprisonment rates are low (66 per 100,000, compared to the USA which has the highest rate in the world at 750 per 100,000 and New Zealand at 155 per 100,000) and prison conditions are humane. In Scandinavia, going to prison, and the ensuing loss of freedom, is in itself the punishment for crime and prison conditions approximate life outside as much as possible (Pratt, 2007). There are no bars on windows and in some prisons inmates lock their own doors and carry keys, as well as working in the community (Pratt, 2007). If the effectiveness

of prison is measured by recidivism rates, the Scandinavian system is working with rates at 20%, compared to 70% in New Zealand and the USA (Pratt, 2007). In New Zealand, the Department of Corrections run most prisons and they aim to reduce reoffending and rehabilitate prisoners through drug and alcohol treatment and programmes targeted to address behaviours related to offending (Clayworth, 2012), as well as offering onsite employment opportunities, and programmes specifically for Māori. The chief executive for Corrections, Ray Smith, outlines in a report from 2016, entitled *“Investing in better mental health for offenders”*, that plans are underway to improve the physical conditions to support a more therapeutic environment.

Working within the prison environment

The challenges

When searching for literature related to working in prisons, information about the challenges experienced by counsellors is plentiful. Prison environments pose massive challenges to counselling interventions in terms of what is described as the therapeutic frame. Privacy, comfort, safety, consistency and confidentiality are all paramount in a counselling environment but often lacking in a prison context (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011; Gee, Loewenthal & Cayne, 2015; Ferrera-Pena, 2010). Often rooms used for counselling sessions have internal windows so clients can be seen by corrections officers and other inmates at all times (Ferrera-Pena, 2010; Rodger, 2004) seriously impinging on the client's privacy. The prison routine is chaotic and unpredictable, sessions can be interrupted by security checks or lock-downs, time boundaries are blurred (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011) and clients are often absent due to medical appointments,

court appearances or visits from other agencies. Furthermore, the counselling relationship can be terminated suddenly due to early release or the client being transferred to another prison (Gee et al., 2015), this can be very frustrating for the counsellor and client.

Alongside these professional challenges for the counsellor, the prison environment can be a confronting and frightening place personally (Smith, 1999), where the counsellor could fear for their own safety (Perkins & Oser, 2014). I have not found any literature relating to counsellors feeling as though they are in danger when working one-to-one with clients, but Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2011) related how counsellors in their study felt a sense of danger when they went onto the wings to collect clients. They reported feeling trapped and isolated and outlined how one participant had been very close to being involved in a riot and ended up leaving that job as she felt unsafe. From my own experience working in a men's prison, I have only very rarely felt scared or apprehensive. Some of the aspects of the environment which work against the therapeutic frame are in place to protect people working with inmates. For example, rooms have internal windows so you can be seen and intrusive headpieces have alarms, also there are panic buttons in counselling rooms.

Very relevant to this research was a study by Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2011) which explored the lived experiences of eight counsellors and psychotherapists working in a prison setting in the UK. They discovered that participants felt that the unpredictability of the context meant that counselling sessions were often interrupted, rooms were sometimes not available and confidentiality was tricky. As a result, counsellors had to redefine their notion of the therapeutic frame and work in an adapted way. The prison environment was understood to mean both the physical environment and the emotional environment their

clients were living in and both presented challenges. Participants felt that the therapeutic relationship was of heightened importance in a prison setting and was powerful when judgement was set aside and trust ensued. This research revealed how working in a prison was a rich and valuable experience for the participants despite some feeling isolated and unsupported by the prison.

The emotional environment

The emotional environment can be very influential in determining the effectiveness of therapy as Skogstad, Deane and Spicer (2005) discovered in their research on barriers to help seeking among New Zealand prison inmates. They identified one of the biggest barriers as the male dominated prison environment which reinforces traditional male characteristics such as aggression, competitiveness and limited emotional expression. Evans and Wallace (2008) back up this claim in their research exploring masculinity narratives of male prisoners. These factors aid to create an environment which is not conducive to therapy and emotional expression. Harvey (2011) highlights how the harsh emotional environment impinges on therapy as clients are nervous to open up and let down their defenses for fear of being victimised when they go back to the wings. Inmates have plenty of time to reflect when in prison but often, due the harsh conditions and lack of support, this reflection is not healthy and instead turns into depressive rumination (Harvey, 2011).

An outsider working in a prison environment

As outlined above, most counsellors working in prisons in New Zealand are employed by outside agencies. As an outsider coming into a prison environment establishing positive relationships with Corrections staff is likely to be crucial in working effectively with inmates

(Mills, Meek & Gojkovic, 2012). In their study of eight prisons in the UK, Mills et al. drew on qualitative interviews with prison staff and TSO's (third sector organisations) to look at relations between the two groups and discover whether TSO's are treated as guests, partners or competitors. They assumed that priorities of Corrections staff and TSO's were likely to differ with staff being more focused on punishment and controlling inmates while TSO's may tend to focus on more person-centred, rehabilitative approaches. They were interested to find out if this assumption was true and if so if it would contribute to animosity between the two groups. They found that despite the potential for tension the vast majority of both parties felt that relations between them were positive and rivalry rare. However, there were concerns from a minority of prison staff around security and managing risk with inmates working with TSO's and a small degree of cynicism towards TSO's from older staff who still saw prisons as places of punishment rather than rehabilitation.

Participants, working in prisons in a counselling role, in research conducted by Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2011), spoke about feeling isolated or unsupported by the prison staff. In other research, the metaphor 'opening a can of worms' was used to explain uneasiness felt by Corrections staff when counsellors were working with inmates (Scott, 2004; Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011). Prison officers may be suspicious about what happens in sessions and dubious that an outsider in that environment could be naïve and easily coerced (Smith, 1999). Participants in Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal's research acknowledged having to deal with their emotional involvement and the risk of being manipulated. In order to overcome this, Harvey (2011) stated that it was imperative for therapists who work in prisons to have a grounded understanding of the context of prisons such as the rules and culture.

Counselling clients in prison

Client issues

When working in a prison as a counsellor it is likely that clients will have many needs and struggles. A high proportion of prison inmates have a range of mental health and substance use problems as well as many having learning difficulties, they also often have complex needs that stem from traumatic life events and insecure attachments (Harvey, 2011). They often come from a background of abuse and neglect and have been victims of violence. Some of them may have spent a significant part of their lives living in institutions and some may be better supported in a mental health setting (Ferrera-Pena, 2010). On top of that, the very nature of their situation means that they will be separated from loved ones and possibly worrying about family members and missing them. Harvey (2011) discussed how imprisonment itself brings new challenges for inmates; a lack of freedom, heterosexual relationships, goods and services, security and independence. Inmates' complex needs and issues with trust and acceptance add to the challenge for the therapist (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011), clients may be reluctant to engage.

The role of the prison counsellor

The role of a counsellor working in a prison is unchanged but comes with its own set of complexities, boundaries and rewards. The fact that the client is in prison and has little autonomy may dictate how the counsellor can work with them. For example, an inmate serving a short sentence would be more suited to a brief intervention mode of therapy, simply as a result of their situation (Harvey, 2011). Due to the complex needs of clients in prison, counsellors need to be very flexible and innovative in their therapeutic approaches.

If a counsellor's aim is to work with a client to reduce the chance of them reoffending they need to consider particular traits that most influence the likelihood of future criminal behaviour. Brault (2014) identified these traits as pro-criminal attitudes and beliefs, poor impulse control, disconnection from support systems and affiliation with criminal peers, substance dependence and abuse and weak or inconsistent family support. However, it is not always the case that a counsellor's aim is to reduce the chance of reoffending, as Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2010) highlighted in their research. The counsellors they interviewed believed that therapy in prison was to help enhance clients' awareness of the path they have taken that led them to prison, rather than being directly linked to reoffending. As most counsellors are usually not employed by the prison but rather outside agencies, they are not following direction from the prison about what they need to be addressing in therapy.

It is pertinent to note that counsellors working in a prison in New Zealand, are far more likely to be engaging with males than females. In New Zealand in September 2017, 92.4% of the prison population were men and 7.6% were women (Department of Corrections [DoC], n.d./2017), therefore, it is understandable that the majority of research is regarding working with males in a prison environment. However, Lynn Smith (1999) wrote an article describing *"a counsellor's attempts to understand the unconscious dynamics affecting the process of counselling women in prison"* (p. 429) in the UK. She discussed the notion of primitive anxieties arising from the potential for attack and persecution in a hostile environment where women are often helpless and disempowered. Although she also recognised a sense of hopelessness in herself at not being able to achieve what she would like to achieve with

her clients, she enjoyed the work and noted there were many occasions when she felt she had made a difference. Similarly, Pollack and Brezina (2007) explored the contradictions inherent in providing counselling for women who had been sexually abused within an institution whose mandate is to punish and control. The role of the counsellor in this instance involves helping women manage and minimize the distress they may experience as part of prison life; being locked up, trapped, strip searched, the lack of privacy and the memories and feelings of past abuse that may arise as a result. It is imperative that counsellors working in prisons understand their clients within their environmental context (Varghese, Magaletta, Fitzgerald & McLearn, 2015), the interaction of inmate and environment should guide the work they do together.

Another relevant issue regarding the emotional environment is grief. Bereavement can be devastating even under the best circumstances, but when someone is in prison, already having suffered huge loss as a direct result of incarceration, it can be overwhelming (Masterton, 2014). Many clients in prison are experiencing disenfranchised grief due to limited opportunity to grieve and have their grief supported. Some find it hard to grieve in such a harsh environment. Men in prison will often suffer in silence, afraid to show their emotions in the prison environment where showing feelings and crying is often seen as weak (Masterton, 2014). Counselling the bereaved in prison is complex and harrowing, clients may feel many emotions, particularly anger and guilt (Rodger, 2004). Despair in clients is often associated with feelings of futility, desperation, hopelessness, anxiety, anger and helplessness and may manifest itself in behaviours such as manipulation, violence and suicidal ideation. A counsellors' role in this situation is to be alongside their client offering hope (Gee et al., 2015). Hope is discussed in research by Flesaker and Larsen (2010)

highlighting the importance of hope in the human change process both for clients and counsellors. They believed that to offer hope, you must have hope.

Developing the therapeutic alliance

When it comes to changing behaviour the most effective tool a counsellor has is the relationship they develop with their client. Showing warmth and empathy, having the ability to engage in healthy conflict and a collaborative approach focusing on strength building are effective ways of working with clients in prison (Brault, 2014).

It is widely acknowledged that developing a therapeutic alliance between a counsellor and a client is very important (Barnett 2007), however, this can be hard to achieve in a prison setting. With clients who have a distrust of authority and a history of abuse, building a healthy rapport can take a long time and require a great deal of patience (Brault, 2014).

In an environment deemed to be punitive, it may be difficult to provide a space where the client feels free to speak openly and may view the counsellor with suspicion (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011). Harvey (2001) states that prisons are low trust environments where the inmates and staff are divided by the varying amounts of power they wield. A feeling of inequality in the relationship makes building the therapeutic alliance challenging. Counsellors report feeling uncomfortable about their own freedom, being able to come and go as they please and the obvious contrast to their clients' situation (Smith, 1999). To address this, Pollack and Brezina, (2007), in a paper discussing women in prisons, write about the notion of engaging in a collaborative therapeutic process, being open and honest about all aspects of the therapeutic process such as note taking, co-writing session

summaries and being transparent in what they are asking and why, thus sharing the power with clients and giving them some control.

Confidentiality is vital in establishing trust and building a therapeutic alliance, however, in the prison context confidentiality can be compromised when counsellors face pressures to report offences. Compromising confidentiality can have a devastating impact on trust in the counsellor-client relationship and be a barrier to forming a strong therapeutic alliance (Scharf, Dindinger & Vogel, 1983). Inmates might also view counsellors as prison staff, having power and authority over them, this could lead to an 'us and them' mentality which hinders both the relationship building and honesty (Ferrena-Pena, 2010). It could be helpful for counsellors working in prisons to let clients know if they are not working for the prison, if they are employed by an outside agency or working voluntarily as Williams (1975) discovered when working as a voluntary counsellor at Tongariro Prison. He talked about a breaking the 'us and them' barrier as a heart-warming moment for him and how he was consequently always treated with courtesy and thoughtfulness by his clients.

The emotional toll

The emotional toll of working as a counsellor in a prison is a common theme in the research. Flesaker and Larsen (2010) believe that working closely with clients in a prison setting places counsellors at risk for burnout and feelings of hopelessness. Burnout is frequently linked to feelings of job frustration (Perkins & Oser, 2014). Working with clients with substance abuse issues, (as often is the case in the prison context), can be frustrating and present its own unique challenges. Counsellors are prone to burnout and compassion fatigue as a result of high expectations and idealistic intentions which are often unrealistic (Perkins & Sprang,

2013). Gee, Loewenthal and Cayne (2015) explored psychotherapists' experience of working with despair in a prison setting and how working with such vulnerable clients can touch on the therapist's own vulnerabilities and intense feelings of despair. It is distressing to note that Fahy (2007) discovered a larger percent of counsellors working in prisons are affected by PTSD type of symptoms than those working with the general population. Research shows that having hope and a belief in your clients is an incredibly important sustaining factor for maintaining the mental health of prison counsellors (Flesaker & Larsen, 2012; Gee et al., 2015).

Working with trauma

Trauma occurs when an individual has an experience or series of experiences that is emotionally harmful or threatening. When that individual struggles to recover after an experience they can succumb to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a disorder characterised by one or more of the following: nightmares, flashbacks, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression and avoidance of certain situations (Honorato, Caltabiano & Clough, 2016). In their research in New Zealand prison populations, Indig, Gear and Wilhelm (2016) discovered that 52% of female prisoners and 22% of male prisoners have a lifetime diagnosis of PTSD. Therefore, it is highly likely that counsellors working in prisons will have clients who have experienced trauma and may suffer from PTSD. McGlue (2016), in her report for the NZ Corrections journal, highlights how the impacts of trauma can be exacerbated by daily activities such as banging doors, shouting, confined spaces and body searches and may trigger negative responses for trauma sufferers. She talks about 'trauma informed practice', and describes it as taking the time to understand what is going on for inmates and responding accordingly. The literature shows that counsellors engaging in

trauma work with clients in prison find the work both rewarding and challenging (Ling, Hunter & Maple, 2014).

Counselling Māori

As previously mentioned, disturbingly, just over 50% of inmates in New Zealand prisons are Māori, this figure is higher for women. Counsellors working in prisons in New Zealand will, without question, be working with clients from different ethnicities, including Māori. The New Zealand Association of Counsellors code of ethics states that:

Counsellors shall avoid discriminating against clients on the basis of their race, colour, disability, ethnic group, culture, gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, religious or political beliefs or on any other basis. Counsellors shall work with clients in ways that are meaningful in the context of, and respectful towards, the clients' cultural communities. Counsellors shall be committed to the equitable provision of counselling services to all individuals and social groups. (NZAC Code of Ethics, 2016)

Not only are Māori over-represented in prisons, they have higher levels of mental health issues. In response to this, since the 1990's, health care services in New Zealand have developed contemporary Māori models of health and well-being for use in district health boards and health training institutions (Miller & Furbish, 2015). Māori models of health have also been incorporated into training and practice for counsellors and psychologists in New Zealand. The most well-known and commonly used model is Mason Durie's '*Whare Tapa Whā*' (four-walled house) model. This model depicts a house with four strong equal sides symbolising the four dimensions of Māori well-being: *te taha wairua* (spiritual health), *te*

taha hinengaro (emotional and psychological health), *te taha whānau* (a healthy social environment) and *te taha Tinana* (physical health; Durie, 2007). Counsellors working with Māori in prison could benefit their clients by keeping this model in mind.

Nick Mulqueeney in his article entitled *Tumeke Bro'? A Personal Reflection of a Male White Counsellor Working with Male Māori Tamariki* (2012) discussed how 'white privilege' and unintentional racism can sabotage the therapeutic relationship and when you add the position of power that a counsellor already occupies in the relationship, you have a dynamic that can hamper a counsellor's ability to work effectively cross-culturally. He believes a counsellor must understand where they come from and have been, to be able to form effective therapeutic relationships with Māori clients.

An important guiding principle in counselling is that it is not the counsellor's role to make assumptions about individual clients. In regards to this, to impose or make assumptions about a client's sense of cultural identity is wrong. Rather, it is advisable to build trust and allow the client to disclose information regarding their cultural heritage and identity in their own time (Hirini, 1997). As in any counselling situation, it is vital to be reflexive, flexible and sensitive when working with Māori clients.

The personal experience

The draw to working as a counsellor in a prison

I was interested to find out what research had been done on what draws counsellors to prison work and how they experienced it, I was interested in other peoples' stories. What I

found was that there was very little research on the personal nature of the experience. Literature on what drew people to counselling in general, revealed that students who pursue a career in counselling often do so due to an awareness of social justice issues and/or see it as a calling, counsellors own stories are not estranged to this choice (Hall, Burkholder & Sterner, 2013; Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal 2011).

What counsellors expected the work to be like

The next part of the story I was interested in was what counsellors expected the work to be like. Once again, minimal literature was available but what I did find was that counsellors were fearful and excited at the prospect of the work (Hinshelwood, 1993; Williams, 1975). Hinshelwood (a therapist himself), was interested to discover whether he could get to the bottom of his client's offending and help in some way, contributing to a section of society that normally was not exposed to the benefits of psychotherapy. Williams expected to learn a lot, particularly about raising his tolerance and frustration levels while learning to accept the morals and standards of others without pushing his own on them.

The rewards of the work

As discussed above, the experiences of counsellors working in prisons, as seen in the literature, are frustrating, difficult, constrained and at times dangerous. Despite this, it seemed relevant to explore what the literature would reveal about the rewards of the work. Once again, the research was sparse. However, what I did discover was that despite struggling with hope, at times, Smith (1999) enjoyed her work as a prison counsellor and thought she was doing valuable work. A bereavement counsellor in the UK, Rodger (2004) said that the work could be challenging but there was great reward in seeing clients change

and feel optimistic about their futures. Another bereavement counsellor, Ferrera-Pena (2010), talked about how her clients respected and valued her and that she was deeply moved by their willingness to open up and relive painful experiences. Williams (1975) felt great reward when clients who had returned to prison realised that he did not judge them and their walls came down. The common theme reflected in the literature is that the rewards of the work are all about the relationship with clients and the joy in the connection.

Summary

This chapter starts with an explanation of what counselling is and a brief history of counselling in New Zealand. It then goes on to examine, through the literature available, the problems with the prison system in New Zealand as well as new initiatives the Department of Corrections are implementing to address these problems. Given the complexity of the prison system and environment, it is not surprising that working in a prison presents many challenges both in coping within the environment and in working with clients and their multifaceted issues. Topics such as trauma, trust issues, the emotional toll for the counsellor are examined in relation to available literature. The chapter concludes with a review of research relating to the personal experiences of counsellors working in prisons. The literature has shown a lack of research into the motivation and expectations of counselors working in prisons. It is my hope that this present research will add to what little is presently available.

With the literature referenced in mind, my interest in this current research is to explore counsellors' experiences of working in prisons. The following research question was devised

to address this interest: *What draws counsellors to work in prisons and how does their experienced reality match their expectations?* The following chapter describes the methodology and methods used in conducting this study and seeks to provide the rationale for choosing these methods in order to answer the research question.

Chapter Three: Methods

This chapter will discuss the methodology and methods employed in this research project, the research participants and how they were selected, the use of semi-structured interviews for data collection and how the data were analysed. It will also examine issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Methodology

Methodology refers to the systematic, theoretical analysis of the methods used in research or a particular study. Generally, it includes concepts such as paradigm, theoretical model, phases and quantitative or qualitative techniques (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016).

This research study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of what it is like to work as a counsellor in the setting of a prison, what draws people to the work, how they experience it as well as the challenges and rewards. As qualitative research is about humans and interpreting human phenomena (Lichtman, 2013), this research lends itself to a qualitative approach. The methodologies of qualitative research are often regarded as inductive, emerging and shaped by the researcher's experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a general term that describes in-depth research about human experience, the main purpose of qualitative research is to explore the human experience

(Lichtman, 2013). It is the most useful approach to understand the meaning people make of their experiences (Morrow, 2007). Through qualitative research, participants can have a voice. As Morrow states, counsellors and psychologists have been at the forefront in using qualitative research methods to explore the depth and complexity of the human experience. Through this qualitative research, participants are given the opportunity to tell their stories with the aim of broadening information available on what it is like to work as a counsellor in a prison.

Qualitative methods are particularly suited to counselling research for a number of reasons. Counselling is a process where, ideally, an empathetic and non-judgmental facilitator works alongside another individual encouraging personal discovery through talking, listening and exploring experiences, emotions and struggles. As a similar process, qualitative research has become increasingly important in the social sciences, particularly in counselling (Morrow, 2007), given its holistic approach of weaving and understanding personal experience. In using qualitative research methods, I am conducting research that is congruent with methods and paradigms that are closely related to the field of counselling within the modalities in which I work.

Qualitative research is designed to examine the 'experiential life of people' (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). Polkinghorne (2005) discusses how using language as a tool, the researcher is able to gain deep insight into others' experiences in a way that is not possible using surveys or similar data gathering methods. Methods used to collect data specific to this approach include descriptions from participants from in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observations. In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted and transcribed

verbatim. I chose to interview participants individually to allow them to speak freely and interact with myself, as the researcher, in such a way that we could co-construct their narrative. Taylor (2005) states that interviews are probably the most commonly used data collection method within qualitative research.

Just as counsellors rely on a theoretical preference to guide them in their therapeutic work, researchers use research traditions to guide their qualitative research design decisions (Taylor et al., 2016). According to Morrow (2007), counselling practitioners may find qualitative research closely aligns with the narrative perspectives of their therapeutic work. Therefore, this study uses a narrative approach to attempt to answer the research question: *What draws counsellors to work in prisons and how does their experienced reality match their expectations?* Choosing a narrative research approach is congruent with the research orientation and purpose of this study, and using it throughout, according to Creswell (2007) is vital to ensure rigour and trustworthiness.

Narrative Inquiry

Story telling is a tradition which spans history and cultures. Stories are passed down verbally or through letters, books, poems or art works. The term 'narrative' has a variety of meanings but is often used synonymously with 'story' (Riessman, 2008). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define narrative as both a phenomenon and a method. As a phenomenon, narrative is the experience to be studied and, as a method, it is the pattern of inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly's narrative inquiry is increasingly recognised as a valuable qualitative approach, particularly in the field of counselling (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016) however, narrative inquiry is much more than the telling of stories (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007).

Narrative inquiry is not merely a repetition of participant's stories, it is taking what may present as a random series of events and creating meaning through analysis and interpretation (Riessman, 2008).

The narrative researcher takes an interpretive approach to their work, as do many modalities of counselling, and views the subject as the expert on himself or herself.

Understanding personal experience is the ultimate focus of narrative and of this study.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue the importance of studying personal experience and state that listening to and studying other people's stories is an opportunity to educate one's self and others.

Narrative inquiry fits well for this study because in conducting this research I was interested in the stories the participants told about their experiences of working in a prison. Narrative inquiry relies on the written or spoken word of individuals, the story becomes an object of study and the researcher attempts to interpret or make meaning of the story (Lichtman, 2013). The distinguishing characteristic of narrative inquiry is that personal storytelling is involved. There is a strong collaborative aspect of narrative research as the stories emerge through the interaction and dialogue of the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2007) and the art of narrative inquiry is embedded in the researchers' understanding of the experiences of the participants (Riessman, 2008). I have a lot in common with my participants, we are all counsellors and we have all had the experience of working as a counsellor in a prison. This helped in my understanding of the experiences of the participants and had an effect on the direction the interviews took and the questions asked.

Creswell (2007) outlines the procedures for carrying out narrative research on a small number of participants as gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting on their individual experiences and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences. Although, he notes that chronologically ordering may have less importance when the researcher is more concerned with identifying themes that emerge across the data. I was interested in the individual stories of the participants as well as curious about themes which emerged across the data. In the narrative analysis, both the participants' individual stories and the themes which emerged across the data are explored.

My research is epistemologically grounded in a constructionist methodology that is based on an assumption that there are multiple socially constructed realities (Burr, 2015) and that the relationship between the researcher and the participant is interactive and cooperative (Ponterotto, 2010). Narrative inquiry is a relatively new qualitative methodology and has realist, post-modern and constructionist strands (Clandinin & Huber). I researched my area of interest using narrative inquiry, approaching the study from a constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm.

Interpretivism

From an interpretivist perspective, our understanding of the world is only socially constructed and all knowledge we have about it is subject to interpretation (Poetschke, 2003). Researchers adopting an interpretivist approach seek understanding of the world in which they live and work, relying as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation (Creswell, 2007). Researchers recognise within this paradigm that reality is socially constructed and specific to one's social contexts. Those using an interpretivist approach

generally consider the subjective perspective of a person's reality as an inside perspective as they are primarily interested in what participants perceive to be important. They tend to adopt more flexible research structures and remain open to new knowledge throughout the study, letting things develop as they go (Morrow, 2007). The theoretical approach of interpretivism is considered most appropriate here, given that the focus of this research is on participants' own experiences within a specific setting.

I approached this research aware of how my background may shape my perceptions and with an openness to new knowledge emerging throughout the process. It is common for qualitative researchers to make their own situation and views apparent to help the reader understand their stance vis-à-vis the research (Morrow, 2007). I am a trained counsellor, I also have a psychology degree and a primary teaching diploma. Before I worked as a counsellor, I taught year 7 at a low decile school where social issues were apparent with some of my students. It was then that I developed an interest in people who were disadvantaged or marginalised due to their life circumstances. This interest led me to my work in prisons. I have trained in various counselling modalities and, in my counselling work, I uphold the belief that the client knows what is best for them, that everyone has strengths and that tapping into these strengths and focusing on them is important. I aim to have unconditional positive regard for all my clients and to be accepting and non-judgmental. I believe that humans are fundamentally good and that we are all shaped by our backgrounds and upbringings. Thus, I seek to understand the world of lived experience from the perspectives of those who live in it, taking an interpretivist approach (Walker, 2015). This approach underpins the focus of my research.

Method

Recruiting Participants

Due to the in-depth nature of narrative research, it is best suited to a small sample size, collecting extensive detail (Creswell, 2007). I chose to interview four participants using semi-structured interviews. I used purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to select my participants. In using purposeful sampling, the researcher chooses participants because they can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156).

My participants needed to be counsellors who were working or who had worked with clients in a prison environment. I have been working as a counsellor in a prison for a year and a half and meet other counsellors through my work. I contacted potential participants by emailing them information about my research in the form of a participant information sheet and consent form. Snowball sampling involves gaining access to potential participants through information from other participants (Lichtman, 2013). Through this process, I was contacted by email by four people who agreed to participate in my study. They all signed a consent form and a time was made to meet at a suitable location and time. I met three of the participants at their work place and one at a library near their work place. The participants were all currently working one-to-one with clients in prison as well as doing other counselling work. They were two men and two women aged between 45 and 65.

Data Collection

Data was collected over a period of a month. I met with each participant individually for a period of 60 to 90 minutes and interviewed them. Each participant was interviewed once, I recorded the interviews on my mobile phone and a dictaphone and transcribed them verbatim. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and potential changes.

Interviewing

As I am interested in counsellors' stories, I used a narrative methodology to gather rich information by interviewing participants and allowing opportunity for the researcher and participants to co-construct stories and get deeper meaning from narratives. Collecting data through interviewing offers the potential to capture an individual's in-depth perspective of an experience (Lichtman, 2013). To hear the participants' stories and elicit a rich and nuanced account of their experiences, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are used to facilitate a more focused study of a specific topic, where interview questions are used as a guide rather than dictating where the interview goes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This allows flexibility in the interview so that if the participant raises an idea or area of interest, this can be pursued. The aim of any interview is to explore the 'insider perspective', capturing the participants own words, thoughts, perspectives, feelings and experiences (Taylor, 2016). My interview questions formed a loose guide to the conversation, allowing the participants to take the interview in the direction they chose, exploring things that were pertinent to them.

I asked the participants broad questions and allowed them to expand on their stories and accounts, talking about what was important for them. In order to address the research question: *What draws counsellors to work in prisons and how does their experienced reality match their expectations?* The following questions guided the interviews:

- What drew you to work in a prison?
- What did you expect it would be like?
- Was it like you thought it would be?
- What do you enjoy about it?
- What do you find challenging?

I was open to exploring whatever participants were passionate about and hopeful that the questions would generate in-depth discussion. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) note that the generativity of the interview depends on both partners and their willingness to engage in a deep discussion about the topic. There was an immediate connection with all the participants because we shared the common experience of working in a prison as a counsellor. I believe this shared experience helped build rapport, allowing the participant to be more open, with the effect of the interview becoming more like a conversation.

Narrative thematic analysis

There are no set procedures for narrative analysis and researchers can use different approaches. Butina (2015) believes that the most common approach is narrative thematic analysis in which the content within the text is the primary focus, this was the approach I took. This approach explores 'what' is spoken rather than 'how,' 'to whom' or 'for what

purposes' (Riessman, 2008), researchers generally pay little attention to how a story unfolds in a conversational exchange or the role the interviewer plays. The transcribed interviews produced data from which key themes were identified and analysed using narrative thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative analysis; it allows the researcher to identify, analyse and report themes and patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Frequently, it goes further than this and enables the researcher to interpret various aspects of the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I followed the 6 steps outlined by Braun and Clarke in my thematic analysis:

1: I familiarised myself with the data: I transcribed the interviews myself making preliminary observations as I went. Then, I read the transcripts several times and checked them back against the audio recordings for accuracy.

2: Generating initial codes: By using highlighters and writing notes in the margins I coded the data identifying interesting aspects of the data that may form the basis of repeated themes.

3: Searching for themes: I then sorted the different codes into potential themes and collated the relevant coded extracts within these themes.

4: Reviewing the themes: I reviewed and refined my themes checking relevance and validity in the hope that my themes accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data set as a whole.

5: Defining and naming themes: I then further analysed themes checking there was not too much overlap between themes and established sub-themes. Concisely naming themes helped to clearly define what themes are and are not.

6: Producing the report: I wrote up the analysis in a clear, coherent way that is hopefully interesting to the reader and convinces them of the merit and validity of the report. The themes were discussed in depth in the discussion section of this thesis.

Although I followed certain steps in my analysis, narrative analysis is not necessarily a step by step procedure as analysis begins even during data collection. Initial analysis begins during the interview while the researcher notices emerging themes or insights which can direct them to probe further or alter questions (Butina, 2015).

As well as identifying themes in the collective data, I was also interested in the participants' stories individually. There are many schools of thought in the art of narrative inquiry, however, the one point of constancy is the observation that narrative inquirers study experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) observed that the use of narrative inquiry is inspired by the view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The view of experience which they refer to is rooted in John Dewey's philosophy (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006) that even though people are individuals, they need to be understood in a social context. Connelly and Clandinin went further to define narrative inquiry as:

...a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with

milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people's lives, both individual and social.

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p. 20)

This research delved into the current and past experiences and relationships of participants in the context being researched. In the analysis, Connelly and Clandinin's three-dimensional narrative inquiry space is considered. The three dimensions of the metaphoric narrative inquiry space are: the personal and social (interaction) along one dimension past, present and future (continuity) along a second dimension, and place (situation) along the third dimension (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006).

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, ensuring credibility is one of the most important considerations in establishing trustworthiness. Credibility ensures congruence between the findings and 'reality' so that the study measures what is actually intended (Shenton, 2004). In addressing issues of credibility, I chose to work voluntarily as a counsellor at a prison to get an understanding of the context and experiences addressed in my research. I also adopted a research method that was well established in qualitative research and appropriate to my study. I used semi-structured interview techniques to allow participants scope to discuss what was important to them, resulting in rich in-depth data. I had monthly meetings with my university supervisors to help me widen my perceptions and recognise my own biases. In addition to these meetings, I evaluated the project as it developed through a 'reflective commentary' (Shenton, 2004), using a journal to maintain an awareness of my positioning in

relation to the study and use my subjectivity as a source of data. Researcher reflexivity gives the researcher an opportunity to understand how their experiences and world views affect the research process (Morrow, 2005).

Lincoln and Guba (1985), consider 'member checks' to be the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study's credibility. With this in mind, I asked the participants after their interviews if they would like a copy of the transcript and three of the four participants requested that I send it to them. I asked participants to review the interviews I had transcribed to check that I had accurately captured their thoughts and stories, that their words matched what they actually intended. I offered them the opportunity to delete, add or change anything in the transcripts, none of the participants requested any changes.

In an effort to ensure dependability, I was transparent in my methods providing a clear account of methods used and keeping thorough records (Shenton, 2004). I identified deviant cases (Yardley, 2017), that is, data that sits outside the emerging themes and patterns, including it in my findings as, according to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), the goal in qualitative research is not to eliminate inconsistencies but to ensure the researcher understands when they occur.

The concept of confirmability corresponds to the idea of objectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Shenton (2004) recognises that the intrusion of the researcher's biases is inevitable. In this research, I used the participants' own words in the findings chapter, including quotes from the transcripts in order to accurately reflect the data.

Overall, the main thing I did to ensure trustworthiness was being constantly aware of my own role within the research project. This included being reflexive in my approach, constantly checking my potential bias and having an objective attitude to my data – being open to what I may find. Morrow (2005) states that:

...researcher reflexivity provides an opportunity for the researcher to understand how her or his own experiences and understandings of the world affect the research process. (p.253)

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

A key strength of this study is that it provides insight into counsellors' personal experiences of working in prisons, something there is very little research on. I believe that working with qualitative methodology and using in-depth individual interviews allowed participants to freely tell their stories resulting in rich data. I also believe that myself, as the researcher, being a counsellor also working in a prison was an added strength because it gave me a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and helped to form a connection between researcher and participant easily, we had common ground. This could also be seen as a limitation as researcher subjectivity may be compromised and assumptions made based on the researcher's own experience rather than the participants'.

By its very nature, qualitative research has certain limitations, some of which are apparent in this research. Deliberation has been given to ways of accounting for these limitations as outlined in the section above. Sample size could be considered a limitation, even though

narrative analysis lends itself to a small sample size, more participants could have resulted in more generalisability, although, this was not the intended goal of this study. Participants in this study, although working in different prisons, were all working in the same city. Interviewing counsellors from other cities or countries could have produced more varied data. Finally, all the participants had started working as counsellors in prisons later in life meaning they had been doing it for a short time (around 6-8 years). A limitation could be the mere fact that all participants were relatively new to the role, it may have been better to interview counsellors who had been working in prisons for varied lengths of time to see if this had an effect on how they felt about the work.

Ethical considerations

In any research study, ethical issues relating to protection of the participants are very important (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Prior to beginning my research, I submitted an application to the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee seeking their approval. In this study, I ensured that consent was informed and obtained using written consent forms and participation was voluntary. In the consent, I included information on the purpose of the research, the methods, the time period and a clause stipulating that participants could withdraw at any time, none of the participants chose to do this. I was clear about confidentiality and anonymity and used pseudonyms, stored data securely and did not disclose which prison the participants were associated with.

Chapter Four: Findings

The aim of this study was to explore counsellors' experiences of working with clients who are in prison. I was interested in what drew them to the work, how they found it and what the rewards and challenges were. As already mentioned, the data were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant and transcribed verbatim. In this chapter, I will look at the narratives derived from these interviews and the shared experiences or ideas which I identified as themes. This chapter begins with each participant's story. Pseudonyms have been used and any other identifying data has been changed in order to protect anonymity.

The participants' stories

Sarah

Sarah's parents both worked in caring professions. She has a strong sense of social justice and attributes this to her upbringing. Sarah's faith in God is important to her and underpins her work. She has a background working in early childhood and talked about her concern for social issues with the children in her care and how she had a particular interest in advocating for those who she thought were not in a position to advocate for themselves, this is what drew her to counselling and eventually to her work in prisons. Sarah thinks her start in early childhood has been very helpful in understanding her clients more and in working with them around parenting issues. She enjoys feeling useful and helping people who are at a crossroads in their life. Sarah feels she can relate easily to a wide range of

people, she said that being non-judgmental and accepting comes easily to her. Wherever she has worked, she has not been afraid to challenge systems if she thinks they are wrong. She found the prison work shocking at first but describes herself as brave by nature and was not frightened by some of her clients' scary appearances. Hearing her clients' stories stirred up her passion and desires to have an influence on social change. She talked about some things being too big to have an influence on, so she focuses on things she can have an influence on, like advocating for better food in prison. As a counsellor, she describes herself as *"practical"* and *"down to earth"* and says she has *"never really fitted into a box very easily, and that's good."* She can be a bit of a rebel and enjoys challenging rules that do not make sense. She is frustrated by the way people isolate themselves in the workplace and believes in the value of working together and being transparent in what you are doing.

Sarah values the importance of self-care and thinks peer supervision is vital. She enjoys exercise and finds that is how she switches off from work. Sarah wishes to continue her work in the prisons and says that there is something under her skin about the work, although she enjoyed a varied career in the past and does like new challenges.

David

David trained as a counsellor later in life after a long career in sales. He has always had an interest in people and their lives and feels he relates well to others. He attributes this to lessons he learnt from his mother from a young age. She was an excellent listener and always available and willing if he needed to talk. He is now a father and a grandfather and aspires to always put his family first.

David gave up a lucrative career for one which earns less money but he finds immensely satisfying. In his own words, there is *“no comparison at all”*. As well as working in prisons, he works with youth and as a drug and alcohol counsellor. He loves the work, the interaction with the community and working collaboratively with people. He has trained in various modalities and uses a variety of approaches in his different roles. He enjoys working with people with a range of issues. David works at a prison two days a week engaging with clients who have been victims of sexual abuse. He enjoys the work with the clients but finds the environment unpleasant and not conducive to therapy. He is bothered by having to wear an earpiece and the lack of confidentiality.

David is practical in his work and is happy to write letters and advocate for clients. He is very conscious of his clients seeing him as an equal and feels the environment hampers this. He is frustrated with the prison structures and systems and feels the environment does very little for rehabilitation. He talks about there being better ways of doing things.

David talks about the connection he develops with his clients and how powerful that can be. He finds his work very rewarding and energising and says there is nothing he would rather be doing.

Kate

Kate did her counselling training as an adult and started working in prisons straight away. Her interest in the work stemmed from a situation she found herself in which completely challenged her perception around how people end up in prison. She saw how people can get drawn into a world of crime and was fascinated by this. She says she instantly liked the

work although she found it challenging. She had an emotionally abusive childhood and has had her own counselling journey. She says she has always had *“a thing for the underdog”*.

Kate has worked in both women’s and men’s prisons. She found working with women harder than working with men because she found it harder to engage with women due to their trust issues. Kate thinks women in the prison are very vulnerable and often struggle to open up. Despite this, she finds the work rewarding and believes being employed by an outside agency rather than the prison is helpful in forming a connection. She enjoys the connections she forms and feels the work she does is valuable.

Kate is very frustrated with the prison environment and systems. She believes the harsh punitive environment does little to help with rehabilitation. She would like to see prisoners have more rights and be treated better; she struggles with what she sees and finds it distressing. Kate said her lack of ability to affect any kind of change on the systems and environment makes her feel like a tiny fish swimming in a tsunami. Kate would like to see more one-to-one counselling available in prisons, she thinks group work is very intimidating for some and even dangerous at times.

Kate spoke about the importance of self-care for her and the fact that she would not like to work full-time at the prison as she finds it draining. However, she loves the time she does spend there as she feels she is making a difference and sees change in her clients. She loves to see the relief in her clients when they get the opportunity to share their burdens.

Sam

Sam initially trained as a social worker overseas, then came to New Zealand where he trained as a counsellor and worked with families before moving into one-to-one counselling. He said he has a diverse way of thinking and does not relate well to linear models of counselling. He first started working at a prison facilitating group programmes and really did not enjoy the work. He found it scary and was present when violence erupted on several occasions. He now works one-to-one with men and enjoys it. Sam says he is interested in trauma and change, he feels useful in the work he is currently doing. He enjoys seeing clients put their guard down and open up. Sam can see the value in being “*peer-like*” with his clients in an effort to establish their trust.

Sam is critical of the prison environment, he believes a lot of the systems and processes disempower the men and that they are all treated like they are tricky, regardless of whether they are or not. Sam can see the value in treating clients with respect and wants them to know that he sees them as a human being, not a prisoner.

Shared experiences/themes

The common experience of all the participants can be described in three superordinate themes and within these themes, 13 subthemes. The first superordinate theme explored the prison context and systems; more specifically, what it was like to work within the prison environment, what the clients were like, the experience of working with prison staff and participant’s thoughts on prison rehabilitation programmes.

The second superordinate theme highlighted aspects of the counselling work that were specific to working in a prison. This theme was broken down into five subthemes: building a therapeutic alliance, addressing the power imbalance, meeting clients where they are at, hope and hopelessness and working with trauma.

The last superordinate theme was concerned with examining the personal experience of the counsellors focusing on what drew them to the work, what their expectations of the work were, what the reality was and what they felt was rewarding about the work.

These themes are explored in detail and extracts from the interview transcripts are included to exemplify these themes through the voices of the participants.

Theme one: The prison context

Initially, the most overwhelming aspect of working in a prison is coming to terms with the physical environment and the prison systems (Rodger, 2004). All participants spoke at length about the context of working in a prison and the things they found different as well as challenging and frustrating. These things can be separated into four themes; the prison environment and systems, the clients, working with staff and the rehabilitation programmes.

The prison environment and systems

Three participants spoke about the challenges of the physical environment of the prison, specifically the room used for counselling sessions:

"I think the physical environment compounds the situation tremendously, it's just got a table and two chairs. Whenever they have a meeting with somebody, it's an interrogation."

"the small rooms.... they'd be grey, they'd be dirty but there'd be a table there and we'd sit either side of the table there. Now there's a set of bars, like in a wild west jail, down the middle..."

One participant described what the environment was like for the clients:

"Their world is largely grey, it really is. Their uniforms are grey, the place is filthy, it's noisy, there's a lot of very unwell people there and there's a lot of banging."

The participants described the prison environment as "toxic", "very dangerous", "worrisome" and "not the place for so many people with mental health issues." One participant specifically discussed the violating nature of strip searches and the effect they have on female prisoners who have been sexually abused:

"... there's so much violating stuff that goes on, you know, strip searches, the women really, really struggle with that stuff. The men have never mentioned it all these years. It must happen but it doesn't have such a fundamental impact on them, but the women, you know, it's like sexual abuse all over again, it's horrendous."

Another participant talked about the latent sexuality of exchanges in the men's prison, between staff and inmates in particular, and the complexities of this for clients:

"... but what they are not seeing is the latent sexuality of that exchange. It's invisible to them, but there's an awful lot of that in the prison, um... there's just an awful lot of that in the prison. It's that thing where, um, it's like somewhere between homophobia and homoerotic exchanges, where straight guys will be making sexual jokes, they're both straight but they're flirting and so sometimes it's complex."

All participants alluded to the physical dangers of prison life for all inmates and the effect this has on their clients:

"A lot of them just ask to be locked up in their cell because they feel so vulnerable, and then they start to get paranoid and think everyone's talking about them....it just feels really unsafe."

"The staff are suspicious, the prisoners are suspicious, there's this latent violence. They don't know who to trust, they know the place is full of criminals themselves. It's a very worrisome place for them."

All participants discussed the challenges of working within the prison system, for example, the difficulties around confidentiality, the lack of organisation, the punitive way the inmates are treated and a feeling that their work there was not valued at times:

“For me going in to the prison, the working with the men is the easy bit. The getting through the security, the dealing with the staff’s attitudes, the physical environment that we have to work in and the total disregard for, you know, finding a confidential space. All of that stuff I really struggle with.”

“... dealing with the annoying things about the systems, waiting, the irritations of the lack of organisation in a system where the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing, whether you’re booked in or not. I think most counsellors would say that is probably more tiring... devaluing counselling to some degree, some of those things are more tiring than working with the people themselves.”

All participants expressed frustration at how the systems and environment made life so much harder for the inmates and sets them up for failure sometimes:

“A lot of the prison process disempowers the men. It kind of moves to remove their identity and treats them as though they are all tricky.”

“Oh, they are literally set up for failure sometimes, I honestly think that, umm, sometimes it’s as simple as that.”

Violence is a part of the prison environment and one participant spoke about the effect this had on them:

“it’s quite normal for somebody to turn up who had been violently attacked since you saw them the previous week, you know, or been exposed to that level of violence. On one level it perhaps doesn’t impact, doesn’t affect you but, you know, on another level of course it does, it has to. Or, if you’re talking to somebody who’s murdered somebody, or often they’re in that group of peers that somebody’s been killed or murdered in a violent way and, you know, you’re hearing about this stuff all the time. I don’t want that to become normal for me. At the same time, I don’t want to have a reaction that’s going to interfere with the therapeutic relationship, so, those are the kinds of things that you’re having to deal with all the time which you perhaps don’t need to deal with maybe through general counselling environments.”

The clients

All participants discussed the complexities and challenges of working with clients who are in prison, their characteristics and situations and the effect the environment has on them:

“Some of them are locked up for 23 hours a day, they don’t get any natural light some of them. They don’t get proper exercise, anything that would be helpful for them if they’ve got anger issues... anything that can help them express that in a healthy way is taken away, so they are left struggling in their own bodies really and then they can’t sleep at night.”

Generally, clients come to prison struggling with trauma from their past and the environment often exacerbates the situation. All participants spoke about their clients as having very high needs. A lot had grown up in gang pads and been exposed to violence all

their lives, many had been sexually and/or physically abused as children and had turned to drugs or alcohol later in life:

“people that have been brought up in gang pads and all that kind of stuff you know, where they’ve been exposed to such a lot of violence from such a young age.”

“they’re victims of stuff in their own life usually, they’re all pretty damaged.”

“a normal day for me would be three gang members, maybe somebody’s that on a life sentence for murder or sexual assault, you know it’s really heavy stuff. And also, you often see clients in the media; all of that impacts. Vulnerable people, so I’ve had clients I’ve got with who have died.”

“There’s a big percentage of disenfranchised, hurting, traumatised people with mental health issues, illness and also drugs and alcohol.”

Clients were described as *“suppressed”*, and having *“nothing concrete, there’s no foundation.”* One participant spoke about a dangerous client who had asked for something to be brought in for him and how this is one of the vulnerabilities of working with clients in prison.

Two participants mentioned uncomfortable encounters they have had with clients:

"I've only had one encounter with a prisoner where I came away feeling really dirty, and he had rapes and a murder of a woman, by his lack of trust kept on trying to position me as hostile to him and the struggle was not buying into that."

"I've only ever had one experience where I've felt I.... I didn't want to see that person again, and I felt really uncomfortable and this person was, he was a psychopath and he will be in prison forever and he needs to be in prison forever, and that doesn't mean to say that I still don't have compassion for him."

Working with Corrections staff

All participants spoke about the importance, and sometimes difficulty, of maintaining relationships with Department of Corrections staff. They had all come across staff who had attitudes towards the inmates that they regarded as negative and derogatory and they all found this hard to deal with. On the other hand, they all added that it was not all of the staff or all of the time:

"I think the hardest thing is hearing disparaging remarks here and there from, you know, the custodial officers"

"There's some really good Corrections staff so I really don't want to kind of say the whole thing is awful but, um, I also think people get contaminated in that place when they work there full-time over a long period.....systemic stuff starts to rub off on them and it's not necessarily even, um, well it is things that people say, but just rolling of eyes and you know, kind of total disregard and little off-hand comments, you know,

for that fact that we are dealing with human beings and that sort of lack of compassion.”

All participants acknowledged it was important to maintain positive relationships with Corrections staff as they needed to work together and without their support they had no access to their clients:

“maintaining relationships with staff requires me not to set them up as in opposition, although sometimes I will tell staff that, you know, I can’t talk about it.”

Rehabilitation Programmes

In 1989 the Department of Corrections introduced rehabilitation programmes into prisons in New Zealand. The programmes target specific areas of criminogenic need, such as sex offending, violence and substance abuse (Ward, Day & Casey, 2006). Most inmates complete at least one programme before they are released. One of the participants had facilitated prison programmes in the past and had found it very challenging:

“I didn’t enjoy that youth programme. That work felt, it felt very dangerous for the boys and very peculiar.... The psychology, the game that’s being played where you are placed as the enemy, in prison environments, a lot of male environments, it’s like there’s a game – someone round here is going to be the wanker or the victim and it’s not going to be me. And so, they’re always, because they’re afraid of being persecuted, they’re pushing out and out.”

None of the other participants had worked with groups doing programmes, but three of them had strong feelings about programmes, which came out in the interviews. They all felt that inmates were not safe while they were doing programmes, that they were pushed to open up in a group and make themselves vulnerable and the consequences were not managed effectively. One participant spoke about needing to pick up the pieces in sessions with a client:

“I’ve had a couple of men that I’ve worked with that were really unsafe as a result of those programmes. They were referred to me...they were pushed to, in both cases, talk about the sexual abuse and then it wasn’t managed effectively because it was put back to the group to manage what they talked about.”

Another mentioned a lack of safety in the processes involved in the group work:

“the clients really aren’t clients, they’re kind of objects and the, you know, the process of letting the clients feel safe enough to engage hasn’t been done. And I think quite a lot of the interventions in justice facilities are like that.”

The three participants who spoke about the programmes all mentioned the drug treatment programme, separating it from the other programmes and saying they thought it was effective and worthwhile:

“I’ve heard some good things about particularly DTU, the drug treatment unit, seems to have so many good reports so they must be doing some really good stuff there

around, lots of stuff around core beliefs and they seem to be getting quite a lot out of that.”

Theme two: Aspects of the counselling work that are specific to working in a prison.

The second theme explores the counselling work and the specificities of counselling in a prison particularly building a therapeutic alliance, addressing the power imbalance, meeting clients where they are at, the importance of hope and working with trauma.

Building a therapeutic alliance

All participants discussed the particular importance of establishing trust with their clients and being respectful. Prisons are often low trust environments where there are a lot of power dynamics at play (Harvey, 2011). All participants were aware of this and building a strong therapeutic alliance was something they saw as vital for any change to take place. Two participants spoke about entering into the counselling slowly and being open about trust building:

“they look at me and I say to them ‘well, if you don’t trust anybody... we have this opportunity to meet together and I’m more than happy that we start off with that, that’s how you feel about me’ and I say, ‘let’s explore this journey together and see if that trust might be able to change.’ But I accept the fact there may be no trust there to start with either.”

“The metaphor I use with them is – this work is like putting your toe in the water, if it’s ok you put your whole foot in. If that’s ok, you carry on. If it’s not, you take your foot out.”

One participant felt that being small and softly spoken was an advantage as the clients may feel less threatened. Being peer-like and treating clients with respect was a common theme across the data. Words like empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness and engagement were all used to describe how they worked with clients.

One participant felt that doing practical things to help clients such as writing a letter for them was an important aspect to building a strong therapeutic alliance:

“I’ve tried a combination of being with them, keeping them safe, allowing them to talk. Then, if I can get a couple of practical things going, that builds the trust, that builds the confidence.”

All participants placed a lot of importance on building a strong therapeutic relationship and could see the benefits of this not just for the work they were doing now but for their clients in the future:

“If I can form a really good therapeutic relationship with them, if I can give them a good experience of counselling, if I can help them to feel safe to talk in this

environment, the hope is that eventually they'll engage in something, kind of longer term, for themselves at some point in the future."

Addressing the power imbalance

All participants expressed an awareness of the power imbalance between the client and counsellor when working in a prison, and a desire to minimise this. Two spoke about the advantage of not being employed by the Department of Corrections:

"there's a sense of trust because you're not working for Corrections, so that's really helpful."

"I can go into the prison and just say to people, 'I'm not here to report on you, to analyse you, to put anything before the court. I'm here for you, it's your space to do what you need to do'... I get a connection with them through that because it feels safer."

Following on from wanting to distance themselves from the Department of Corrections, another participant talked about how it would reduce the power imbalance to not be seen as an extension of the guards, to be able to see clients in a confidential room which is *"in a sense non-associated with the prison"*, with the hope that the client would feel as *"equal as they possibly can."*

Meeting clients where they are at

A prison environment is a very unusual setting to work as a counsellor. It is an environment where there are a lot of rules, a lot of tension and the constant threat of violence. There is so much going on for clients on a day to day basis as well as dealing with past trauma.

Participants spoke about being open to meeting their clients where they were at emotionally:

“an awful lot of the work is about them helping them manage themselves now...”

“I have had several occasions where sometimes the only thing you can offer them is the opportunity to talk and to share.”

“and the atmosphere’s just thick and heavy.... but sometimes just sitting with that and injecting whatever I can, you just sort of feel in that desperate place, you’re pulling things out of the air.... But there’s something about that human thing, that sitting with someone through it, not judging massively and not panicking about it...”

One participant talked about having to be patient and allowing clients to go at their own pace, as discussed previously, building trust was something that all participants identified as being vital.

Hope and hopelessness

Hope was something which was mentioned by all the participants, but in different ways.

Two talked about the importance of giving hope to their clients:

"You just try and give them a little bit of hope... because a lot of them, that's the thing they lack, no hope."

"I really believe in hope and how important it is and I've heard a few people say that... it really hits the heart and I just want to share. I'll often say to people 'that's ok, you can have some of mine'."

One participant discussed times when they had struggled with hope, not a feeling of hopelessness with the client but with their situation. In these instances, they liked to try to be practical with the client and see what they could do to help them out, for example contacting an outside agency or speaking to other staff members:

"I try to be not just a counsellor but try to enlighten them and give them some hope, to open some doors for them, to feel like there's an opportunity when they get outside."

Although they mentioned times when they had struggled with hope, they also said they had never felt things were hopeless and that even when the client's situation seemed hopeless there were times when, even though nothing had been solved, the client acknowledged they felt better after talking things through.

A participant talked about the process of helping clients gain hope:

“There is a lot of just walking people through to building back some hope for them in different areas of their life where they might be able to capture some of that and, who are the people that can bring some hope into their lives?”

One participant believed it was their Christian beliefs that gave her hope:

“My number one strength would be for me, I’d have to acknowledge my Christian belief. That is like I’m not doing this on my own, so umm, that sort of under girds everything I do without realising it, and works through and gives me strength to keep doing it, it gives me hope – that’s where my hope comes from.”

She also talked about the need for her to have hope in order to work in a prison with clients who have such huge needs and often very sad circumstances:

“I think with hope, I think you need to keep refilling yourself, keep being filled up somehow, having your own sources of hope, something to pull out.... I just keep looking after me to look after others...”

Working with trauma

All participants identified working with trauma as a big part of the work they were doing with clients in prison. One said that they found working with trauma a huge challenge, another described the work as “massive” due to the high levels of trauma and grief a lot of clients have experienced in the past and the anxiety they experience on a daily basis because of the risks associated with being in prison. One participant talked about how being

exposed to others' trauma all the time and hearing so many new stories can be quite traumatising for the counsellor.

One participant discussed the process which often occurred when working with trauma:

“they go back to some traumatic event in their life, and you talk about that trauma, because some people never get past that trauma, and until they get past that trauma they don’t start living, and when they get past that trauma this whole...just opens up a whole new avenue in their life. The trauma is still there, but it’s put in perspective...”

One participant spoke about working with boys who had experienced a lot of trauma, living in a culture that was constantly re-traumatising and how they operated in survival mode as a result:

“There’s an injury that happens to them, very often is very young, and amid a whole bunch of other things the world stops making sense with the trauma, so then they’re often in survival mode. The trajectory they’re then on, to try and survive, they know that grownups are dangerous, so authorities are dangerous. People talk justice and safety but don’t do justice and safety, and so, there’s what the world says it is officially, and then the reality.”

Two participants discussed the importance of self-care when working with trauma, they both valued peer supervision, discussing things with colleagues and unwinding through exercise:

“...we formed a good relationship at times when I was going in (to the prison) with another counselling colleague.... which really helped, I think if counsellors can do that it’s a real bonus because you can talk.... you can download, peer supervision and things, so that was helpful.”

“...self-care is something that I really, really look after well. In terms of supervision, peer support and looking after myself. So, I’m a runner, I do a lot of running and that’s, you know, my exercise is around my self-care.”

One also needed time alone:

“I do a lot by reflection and quiet, I might put on some really good uplifting music.... I like a lot of quiet and solitude, it really helps for me...”

Theme three: The personal journey

The third theme relates to counsellors’ perceptions of themselves and the positioning of themselves as a counsellor working in a prison. The common experience of all the participants covered what drew them to the work, what their expectations were, what their first impressions were and what they found rewarding about counselling in a prison.

The draw

When discussing what it was that drew them to the prison work all participants spoke about having an interest in people and, more specifically in some cases, an interest in people who have had a hard life:

"I really can relate to a range of people...some of the non-judgmental acceptance stuff, it comes pretty naturally."

"I suppose I've always had a little bit of a thing for the underdog..."

"I'm interested around trauma and I'm interested around change and there's a bit of me that thinks that counsellors are like vampires, we need someone to be in pain for us to live, on one level, so we can exploit the worried well...we need to meet people where they're at."

One participant had a personal experience with someone she knew ending up in prison which changed the way she saw things and triggered her interest in prison work:

"I could see the potential for when things go wrong, you know, just how people can get drawn into that world, you know, from what is potentially a really normal kind of functional world...that was perhaps my initial interest really of, you know, I suppose my perception I'd always had around who goes to prison in society got completely challenged through that whole experience..."

One participant spoke about being a rebel, not quite fitting into a box herself and enjoying questioning rules and challenging the status quo:

"I have a little bit of rebel in me. I like to question rules that don't make sense, rules that are for rules sake and of course, prison is full of some of those things."

"I've never quite fitted in a box very easily and that's good. So, I just go with that and I think being in prison, it's kind of helpful because there's a lot of people there that probably have never fitted into a neat box..."

All the participants identified their interest in counselling stemming from the way they were brought up, what their parents were like and their early experiences:

"I guess my dad was quite a compassionate person...he was accepting of everyone, so I guess some of his values have come through with me as well."

"My dad was a GP, and the talking and thinking.... It comes much easier than anything else."

"My mother, you know, if I ever heard anything at school or anything I didn't understand, I would always come home and my mother would always sit down, it didn't matter what the topic was, she always listened."

“My dad shaped me because he showed me what I didn’t want to happen and I appreciate that. I would never have found that career without him being in that situation...”

Counsellors’ expectations of what it would be like to work in a prison

Participants had different expectations of what it would be like to work as a counsellor in a prison. Two participants were initially scared at the idea of prison work:

“I didn’t know what to expect really, I felt quite scared.”

“My interest in the prison work is...um...was...I’m quite scared of it, just because, you know, these people have done lots of bad things.”

As well as feeling scared, one participant thought it would be fascinating and hoped to be part of life changing work:

“My expectation in that hopefully I’ll be able to really start to see much more life changing stuff through this. People are able to do a piece of therapy work which will help them turn a corner, I’m not just talking about it in terms of why they’re in prison, but just in their own personal lives that they’ll be able to make a shift to somewhere that they can’t go back.”

Similarly, another participant expected to feel useful:

“just wanting to be really useful, knowing that people are probably going to be at, you know, a real turn around point potentially, or at least getting them somewhere along the way...”

One participant was excited about beginning the work, they had experience working for probation and were familiar with the clients and issues they may be dealing with.

First impressions

When discussing their first impressions of working in a prison all the participants spoke about feeling shocked. They were shocked for different reasons; one participant was shocked more by the structure of the environment than the clients:

“I’ll be quite honest, I was quite shocked when I first started (pause) the shock was not the clients, it was more the systems.”

Two participants were shocked by the clients they first met:

“I remember one young girl who looked about 17, so looked about the same age as my daughter, you know, and you are just thinking ‘oh my gosh!’”

“I didn’t know what to expect really, um it was quite shocking, you know, I felt quite scared. My first client at prison was serving a life sentence. In fact, I got two new ones, both of them were serving a life sentence and both of them coming towards

the end of it, so it really threw me into a different world, you know. These women had been in prison for over 15 years, you know, so it felt quite huge.”

One participant was shocked by what she heard:

“I think there are some things that you think gosh am I really hearing this? You know, about some really sad circumstances and upbringings, yeah, ‘Once Were Warriors’ type scenarios. Yeah so, some things like it’s not that surprising but it’s shocking.”

Another participant, who had previously worked in a prison facilitating programmes, had thought of prison as a very dangerous place to work based on his prior experience.

However, after returning to do one-to-one work for ACC he detected a shift in the culture, he found it less threatening and felt the ACC work was allowing him to be useful.

Despite the initial shock, one participant said she enjoyed the work from the start:

“I instantly liked the work and found it really valuable so, um, you know, I found, in some ways, in all the different places of work, the prison work is kind of the hardest but it is also the most rewarding...”

The rewards

Despite the many challenges all participants talked about, they all also discussed how rewarding the work was.

Two participants mentioned how they really enjoyed the connection they formed with their clients and how this differed to work they did outside the prison:

“I think it’s really the fact of connection. When you get connection with somebody and somebody connects with you, there’s actually nothing more powerful than that.”

“I get a connection with them through that because it feels safer, you know. I mean, a lot of these people are people that’ve been analysed and reported on and put in boxes their whole life.... they get it really quickly and therefore, um, trust builds quite quickly... I can often see quite valuable work happening quite quickly, so, it’s really rewarding.”

All participants found the work enriching and rewarding and expressed this in different ways:

“I’d say predominately, it’s been a really good, enriching, amazing experience all round. I’m really glad that I chose to do the prison.”

“It’s a wonderful experience... I actually come home after I’ve been at the prison on a natural high. You know, people can get it from cannabis, I can it just from talking to people.”

“It’s rich... and rather than getting tired, you’re actually energised.”

Two participants found the work rewarding because they felt useful:

“the ACC work was allowing me to be useful.”

“you instantly get that sort of sense that that has been really helpful to them...”

Two participants thought that the prison environment at times offered an opportunity for growth because it gave clients the time to think and reflect without the pressures of their life on the outside:

“I think the growth in the prison is greater than the outside world because they’re in a confined space, completely controlled, no freedom, and then they start to get some peace...it’s the opportunity for people to be able to see something that they haven’t been able to see, to feel something that they probably never ever recognised what these feelings were before.”

“That’s the lovely thing in the prison, that they’re absolutely brimming with stuff to bring you. You can almost see the relief when it’s out and they can unburden themselves.”

Two participants talked about the rewards of seeing another side of their clients, one that they kept hidden from others. One described this as ‘*putting their staunch down*’:

“When they get there and they’re in the room, I enjoy the encounter. What I like seeing is when they put their staunch down...they engage and then it’s interesting the way the tension drops out of them.”

Another talked about enjoying seeing the more vulnerable and sensitive side of clients:

“and it feels really good because, um you know, I guess it doesn’t matter who you meet, in that you see a different side to them than what other people have seen or get to see, and there’s always that vulnerability, that sensitivity.”

These themes and stories are addressed and discussed in the following chapter in relation to literature reviewed.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter will discuss the findings of the research and compare and consider these findings with respect to studies explored in the relevant literature.

The aim of this research was to contribute to the limited literature on counselling in prisons, particularly focusing on the experience of the counsellor. This was driven by my own personal interest in, and experience of, working as a counsellor in a prison. Having worked in a school and a counselling centre, then a prison I became very aware of the many differences, challenges and rewards of working in a prison. I was curious about other's experiences and realised that if I could turn back time I would have liked to have had more knowledge about what to expect before I started work.

As discussed in chapter two, a qualitative research approach was used to provide a means by which the participants could share their stories. Through semi-structured interviews the counsellors told me about themselves, their backgrounds and their experiences of counselling in a prison. Narrative thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts. This analysis of counsellors' experiences of working in prisons has provided an idea of the challenges and frustrations counsellors' may encounter in their work, as well as the rewards. The participant's stories were individually written from the transcripts, and from these stories three main themes and thirteen subthemes were identified as presented in chapter four. I will start by giving a synthesised analysis of the participants' stories then discuss the themes and subthemes.

Analysis of the individual stories

The stories highlight how what the participants bring to their work stems from not only their training and personal qualities but also from their upbringings and backgrounds. It was interesting to note that all participants got into counselling later in life, they had all had other careers before they trained as counsellors. This is true of my own personal story and for most of the counsellors in my cohort at University. As shown in chapter two, there is very little research on what draws people to a career in counselling or why they commonly choose to do it later in life. Hall, Burkholder and Sterner (2014) note that students who choose to pursue a career in helping professions often do so as a result of a desire to empower others and improve social justice. I can only speculate as to why it is a career often chosen later in life. For me, it was something I had always wanted to do but I felt having more life experience would make me better at understanding other people's experiences and struggles. A lot of counsellors I have met through my own counselling journey have had their own struggles (and sometimes mental health issues) and consequently have developed an interest in counselling at a time in their life when they have felt better and able to help others through their difficulties.

Another finding the stories highlighted was the frustration felt by all participants at the way their clients were treated and the conditions they lived in. They all adhered to the belief that if you treat people well and give them opportunity to be more independent, talk more and build their self-esteem, change will happen. This becomes apparent when we look at what Norway are doing in their prisons. The Business Insider included an article in Dec 2014

entitled '*Why Norway's Prison System is so Successful*'. Norway's incarceration rate is 75 per 100,000 people compared to 214 people for every 100,000 in New Zealand. On top of that, Norway has one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world at 20%. New Zealand has one of the highest, 67% of prisoners are back in prison within 5 years of being released (Dept. of Corrections, 2018). The article outlined how Norway's criminal justice system relies on a concept called 'restorative justice' which aims to repair the damage caused by crime rather than punish people, this system focuses on rehabilitation over punishment. Restorative justice practices are also used in New Zealand but not as extensively. In Norway, removing people's freedom is punishment enough, the prisons are comfortable, there are no bars, inmates cook their own food, and relationships between the guards and the inmates are friendly. From the stories and opinions expressed by the participants, it seems apparent that they all adhere to the belief that a system like this is what we need in New Zealand. All participants wished for better conditions for their clients and more humane treatment, they could see the benefit first hand of treating their clients equally and with respect.

Although all the participants' life stories were different, there were similarities in their experiences and ideas. From their interviews, three main common themes were apparent. The participants talked about the frustrations and hardships of working in the prison environment, what the counselling involved and how it was different to working as a counsellor outside a prison and their own personal journeys and life stories. These themes will now be discussed in relation to literature and other research.

Theme one: The prison context

The prison environment and systems

All participants spoke at length about the specific details of working in a prison. Similar to what was apparent in the literature, participants in this research found the physical environment challenging. The spaces they worked in were not private and comfortable and one person described this as contributing to a meeting with a client feeling more like an interrogation than a therapeutic counselling session. It seems obvious that counsellors working in correctional facilities must meet many unique setting needs (Varghese et al., 2015) and the conditions of a prison setting could not be further from the universally accepted ideal context for therapy (Ferrera-Pena, 2010). As an organisation primarily focused on security, control and containment, prison is not a therapeutic environment (Bantjes, Swartz & Niewoudt, 2017). Often there is a lack of appropriate rooms (counselling sometimes takes place in a large hall used for visits), if there is a room available it will always have a window, for security reasons, and will be sparsely furnished (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011; Harvey, 2011). Clearly, counsellors working in prisons need to be flexible and adaptable in their methods. Considering the expectations and initial experiences participants commented on, it could also be very helpful for counsellors stepping into prison work to be aware of some of these challenges.

All participants were also frustrated by the prison systems and lack of organisation, and felt that this added to problems their clients were experiencing; disempowering them and setting them up for failure. Gee et al. (2015) describe the prison as an environment which

“fails to fulfil the basic needs of humans, and in doing so causes deprivation of freedom, security and autonomy.” (p. 141)

As reflected in this research, counsellors can feel like they are fighting the system at times and that their work is devalued. This can be very frustrating, these problems are discussed by Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2010), who state that this can result in counsellors feeling permanently in tension between the prison system and the therapeutic commitments they have towards their clients. This was a strong theme in this study, participants often spoke about feeling at odds between their loyalty to their place of work and their clients. Harvey (2011) concludes that it is vital for counsellors who work in prisons to have a grounded understanding of the specific context as this could help them to know why things are done the way they are. One participant said if they were to work in a different prison in the future, they would find out more about the way the prison operated before starting work, in the hope that an understanding of the institution’s systems and processes would lessen their frustration.

Participants in this research talked further about the prison as a scary, violent and dangerous place for the inmates. When people learn that I work at a men’s prison as a counsellor I am often asked if it is scary. Prisons are scary violent places; however, I have only felt scared once or twice. My experience is the same as all the participants interviewed, they did not feel frightened for their own safety but rather discussed how the environment was frightening for their clients. The prison can be dangerous for the inmates who always need to be vigilant and watch their backs; they are incredibly vulnerable and are often anxious as a result (Harvey, 2011). For all participants, concern for the safety of their clients

far outweighed any feelings they had about their own safety. Harvey (2011) recognises the need for counsellors to keep difficulties associated with a lack of safety at the forefront of their minds when working with clients in prison. Participants were concerned about their client's safety and resulting feelings of vulnerability, they felt it made it very hard for them to trust anyone, gaining trust was a very important factor in building the therapeutic alliance, this will be addressed later.

It is not just danger from other inmates which their clients face; prison is a place where they are subjected to strip searches and often feel violated and at risk. One participant acknowledged how strip searches brought back feelings associated with past sexual abuse for her clients at a women's prison. Pollack and Brezina (2007) discuss how for incarcerated women, who have survived sexual abuse, the lack of control, unequal power dynamics and arbitrary rules they experience while in prison replicate the dynamics of past abuse and bring back the feelings of powerlessness. In this instance, the counsellor must work with the client to manage feelings and issues raised through a situation which is forced upon them in the place they have to call home.

The clients

Undoubtedly, the prison environment has an effect on the prisoners. This study highlighted the extreme conditions and adverse situations the participants' clients experienced.

Therefore, it is crucial that clients be understood within their environmental context (Varghese et al., 2015). One participant discussed how clients who were locked up 23 hours a day and got limited sunlight and exercise had no way to let off steam in a healthy way. It is challenging for counsellors to see the adverse conditions their clients are enduring, which

once again can lead to them feeling in tension between the prison system and the therapeutic commitments they have towards their clients. Like their clients, they realise the power exerted by the establishment and how pervasive the environment can be (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2010).

The findings suggest that, when working with clients in prison, it is vital to take into account both the effect the harsh prison environment may be having on them as well as the difficulties they brought with them into prison. Harvey (2011) outlines the concept of 'imported vulnerability' when considering the complexity of providing therapy in prison. The term describes the difficulties that prisoners import with them into the prison as opposed to the difficulties arising as a result of the experience of being in prison. Following on from this idea of imported vulnerability, the findings show that clients in prison frequently have high needs and traumatic lives both inside and outside the prison and mental health needs in prison are complex and often complicated by high levels of drug and alcohol abuse and significant past trauma (Burns, 2017). Further, clients in a prison setting often have a background of violence, abandonment and neglect. Trauma research shows that there is a very strong link between childhood trauma and incarceration. Honorato, Caltabiano and Clough (2016), suggest that trauma, followed by a lack of support, can sometimes lead to substance abuse to mask the pain and, potentially, violence due to uncontrollable anger, resulting in incarceration. Consequently, the levels of psychological distress, suicide rates and incidences of self-harm are very high in prisons (Burns, 2017; Harvey, 2011). All participants spoke about the shocking stories they heard from their clients about their lives before they came to prison. This is something counsellors working in prisons face on a daily basis. It is easy to be empathetic and non-judgmental when you understand what a client

has been through and the extraordinary obstacles they have faced, it is a profoundly humbling experience to sit with another human being while they share their story.

Frequently, clients have spent a good proportion of their lives in correctional settings or prisons and may have become institutionalised (Ferrena-Pena, 2010). The findings of this study suggest that the implications of this are that clients are often suppressed and feel they have nothing concrete to hold on to. This is a time when it may be a struggle for both the client and counsellor to maintain hope. Clients' complex needs, combined with the impact of imprisonment, are likely to have an effect on their ability to engage in a reflective process (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011). As a result, counsellors need to be flexible in their approach, gentle and willing to take things at the client's pace.

Working with staff

This study further highlighted the challenges participants experienced working with Department of Corrections staff. They all realised it was a necessary part of the job and, although they did not feel they were on the same page a lot of the time, they acknowledged some experiences were positive. Research indicates this feeling is universal and it is not surprising given that Corrections staff are more likely to be focused on punishment, controlling inmates and managing risk, whereas counsellors come from a person-centred, rehabilitative approach (Mills et al., 2012). Counsellors are sometimes perceived as soft and naïve and staff see many potential pitfalls in talking to inmates and getting them to open up (Scott, 2004; Hinshelwood, 1993), fearing they will be left to pick up the pieces. Conversely, participants did note that there were some staff who they felt supported and appreciated by.

Rehabilitation programmes

It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that I did not ask any questions about rehabilitation programmes, all participants in this research had very strong views about them and this came through in every interview. One of the goals of prison programmes in New Zealand is to change values and teach cognitive, coping and job skills to assist in reintegration and ultimately, to reduce recidivism (Newbold, 2007). Most inmates complete at least one programme before they are released. One participant had facilitated prison programmes in the past and was very critical about the way they were run. He did not enjoy the work and felt it was dangerous for him and for the inmates. He spoke about violence erupting at times and how he felt out of his depth. The other participants had formed opinions on the usefulness and danger of the programmes through their interactions with their clients. They all believed that inmates were pushed to disclose sensitive information about themselves in a group setting where they were not safe. They felt there were often serious repercussions after the sessions when inmates were vulnerable. Participants in this research definitely felt that one-to-one counselling was more effective than group therapy and would like to see it more readily available in prisons.

Pollack and Brezina (2007) discussed cognitive behavioural programmes in women's prisons and stated that programmes focus on restructuring the way women think about themselves, in order to prevent them from reoffending. They believe such approaches pathologise law-breaking by implying that criminal activity is the result of impairments in cognitive processes. As was the consensus with participants in this research, they believed that women in prison should be offered one-to-one counselling to deal with the impact of

past trauma instead of being forced to attend programmes which potentially set them up for failure.

Theme two: Aspects of the counselling work that are specific to working in a prison.

Building a therapeutic alliance

Apart from working in a prison, all the participants had experience working with clients in different environments and with various issues; therefore, they were all able to compare their work in the prison to work on the outside. As discussed above, generally deemed a punitive environment, a prison is a very specific and unusual context to work in as a counsellor as there are many challenges to the therapeutic frame (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2010). The physical environment is not conducive to therapy, there is a lack of privacy and often there is not a space suitable for therapy. The emotional environment is harsh, guarded and violence is a way of life in prison. For the participants in this research, the most challenging task when working as a therapist in a prison was to provide a space which is seen as safe by the inmates; when the client does not feel safe, this can affect the therapist/client relationship (Ross, Polaschek & Ward, 2008). All these factors make building a therapeutic alliance more challenging than in a normal counselling setting.

All the participants in this study acknowledged that building a relationship with their clients was of particular importance in a prison setting where gaining trust is often harder because clients have learnt to not trust others in an effort to become less vulnerable. In an

environment where inmates do not feel safe and privacy is lacking, it can be more challenging to develop a therapeutic alliance. Saunders (2001) identifies privacy, confidentiality, therapist neutrality, and predictability and consistency as factors pivotal in establishing a secure therapeutic frame. All of these factors are compromised in a prison setting. Rooms always have internal windows, clients come with files, it is expected that information is shared with other prison staff and the environment is anything but predictable and consistent (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2010). One participant made the comment *“the thing about confidentiality is – it’s difficult.”*

Traditional counselling practice assumes all interactions between counsellor and client are confidential unless someone is actually in danger (Ferrera-Pena, 2010). In correctional counselling, the distinctions defining client confidentiality are extremely ambiguous. Counsellors may feel obliged or pressured to report offenses and share information and this can have a devastating impact on counsellor/client trust and the therapeutic alliance (Scharf, Dindinger & Vogel, 1983).

This study suggests that participants were initially very shocked by the complexities of the specific environment and consequently worked hard to overcome the aspects of the environment that worked against them by adopting a gentle approach, taking things slowly and distancing themselves from the prison systems as much as possible. Words like ‘respect’, ‘unconditional positive regard’, ‘empathy’, being ‘peer-like’ and ‘genuine’ were used when talking about building relationships with clients. One participant felt it was harder to build a therapeutic alliance with female clients than male because the women she worked with had often had their trust violated many times in the past and struggled to let

their guard down for fear of someone else violating their trust. It is impossible to work effectively in a counselling relationship without building a therapeutic alliance (Saunders, 2001), despite it being harder in a prison setting, the findings show that it is possible and when established, amazing work can be done. Maybe even more powerful than work outside the prison as for some clients, the relationship may be the first positive one they have ever experienced and could indeed be life changing.

Addressing the power imbalance

Another factor which impacts on the building of the therapeutic alliance is that no matter how relatable and peer-like a counsellor tries to be, the undisputable fact still remains that at the end of the session they can leave the prison and their client cannot. Participants in this research felt they were constantly fighting factors which highlighted the power imbalance in an effort to try to appear as peer-like as possible. One participant spoke about having to wear an earpiece, making him feel like part of the institution and an authority figure. It is widely acknowledged that this power imbalance may jeopardise the relationship and widen the gap between counsellor and client, creating an '*us and them*' scenario (Saunders, 2001; Smith, 1999; Ferrera-Pena, 2010). As was the case in this research, in an effort to address this power imbalance, it is common for counsellors to distance themselves from Department of Corrections staff and prison protocols (Smith, 1999) with the hope of gaining their clients' trust (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2010). All participants talked about how it was helpful for their clients to be aware of the fact that they were not employed by Corrections. Other strategies discussed included, being transparent in the counselling process by allowing clients to see their case notes and demystifying the process by making explicit the tactics of therapy (Pollack & Brezina, 2007). When working as a

counsellor in a prison, Smith (2007) felt guilty about being able to come and go when her clients could not and was anxious about being resented for this. She also did not want to be seen as an authority figure and would avoid associating with the officers during breaks. This research highlighted how participants tried very hard to distance themselves from the officers and the prison systems, while still working together and within them, to build trust with their clients and the therapeutic alliance which is so necessary for effective therapy to take place.

Working with trauma

As was the case for this research, the majority of clients any counsellor working in a prison will encounter will have experienced trauma in their lives (Stensrud, Gilbride & Bruinekool, 2018). Participants spoke about the counselling work being massive and challenging due to the high levels of trauma and grief clients had often experienced. They said clients were sometimes living in survival mode and were re-traumatised by the prison environment. The impacts of trauma are often trust issues, self-harm, aggression, PTSD, depression, anxiety, hypervigilance and fearfulness and emotional numbing (McGlue, 2016). McGlue outlines the effect of daily prison life on inmates who have suffered trauma in their lives:

In a prison environment, the impacts of trauma can be exemplified because many day-to-day occurrences in a prison can be perceived as threatening for trauma sufferers. Musters, loud noises, banging doors, shouting, confined spaces, control and restraint techniques, lack of privacy and body searches can all trigger responses for trauma sufferers, or profoundly re-traumatise them. (McGlue, 2016, p.2)

Indirect trauma exposure is a term used to refer to when counsellors come to know about clients' trauma experiences through their work with clients (Ling, Hunter & Maple, 2014). Indirect trauma exposure can have adverse stress effects such as compassion fatigue; this is characterised by hyperarousal, a sense of hopelessness, isolation and feeling overwhelmed (Ling et al., 2014). None of the participants mentioned they had experienced any of these symptoms in particular, although, one did acknowledge how they were exposed to trauma all the time and that hearing clients' stories could be traumatising for them. One participant did talk about how they really needed to be careful to look after themselves as a result of being exposed to trauma and violence all the time. They were worried that hearing horrific stories regularly could become normal for them and this was something they did not want:

"You've really got to look after yourself before you can give anything to your clients... you probably need to do more in the prison because we're being exposed to trauma all the time in what we are hearing in that place.... On one level it perhaps doesn't impact, doesn't affect you but, you know, on another level of course it does, it has to... if you're talking to somebody who's murdered somebody, or often they're in that group of peers that somebody's been killed or murdered in a violent way and, you know, you're hearing about this stuff all the time. I don't want that to become normal for me. At the same time, I don't want to have a reaction that's going to interfere with the therapeutic relationship. So, those are the kind of things that you are having to dealing with all the time which you perhaps don't need to deal with through general counselling."

All the participants only worked in a prison for one or two days a week and elsewhere other days, this was a choice they had all made as they believed it made them more effective in their work and reduced the chance of burnout. One participant made an observation about staff who worked full time at the prison:

"I also think people get contaminated in that place when they work there full time over a long period, and I think they do, you know, health staff, counsellors even, I think people you know, when they go in there every day, day in day out, that systemic stuff starts to rub off on them and it's not necessarily even, um well, it's the things that people say, but just rolling of eyes, and you know, kind of total disregard and little off hand comments, you know for the fact that we are dealing with human beings and that sort of lack of compassion".

In their paper about how counsellors navigate the challenges of trauma counselling, Ling et al. (2014) discovered that counsellors who thrive in this type of work saw the work as both challenging and rewarding, maintained hope that trauma could be overcome, limited their exposure to trauma by maintaining boundaries, engaged in self-reflexivity and sought peer support regularly. In this study, as well as only working part time, all participants saw the prison work as rewarding. Two participants acknowledged the particular importance of peer supervision and guidance and one talked about self-reflexivity. They all recognised the nature of the work but had strategies to cope with the challenges and the trauma exposure.

Hope and hopelessness

Hope, helpfulness and hopelessness were all words that featured regularly in the data.

Participants talked about the importance of maintaining hope themselves and giving hope to their clients; they also acknowledged times when, despite never feeling things were completely hopeless, they still struggled with hope. One participant liked to help with practical things when things seemed hopeless, they felt that doing things for a client made them feel like someone had their back and gave them hope. Another participant had faith in God when struggling with hope, they talked about the prison chaplain and how they could offer hope. All participants saw the effects of showing respect to clients who may not feel respected in their daily lives. They alluded to the notion that at times when things seemed hopeless the simple act of showing respect and kindness could make things easier to cope with: *“A tiny little bit of humanity makes a huge difference.”*

Research indicates that hope can serve as a sustaining and motivating factor when facing difficult working contexts. In their study on the role hope plays in the work of reintegration counsellors, Flesaker and Larsen (2010) highlight the importance of counsellors maintaining a hope-seeking perspective and how this allows them to offer hope to their clients. This was definitely reflected in this research; the importance of hope may have been especially clear to the participants given the serious issues their clients face. In their research on delivering therapy in prisons, Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2010) state that a big part of a prison counsellor's role is to generate hope, from this research, I can conclude that it seems this is as much for the client's sake as for the counsellor's.

It would be interesting to have interviewed counsellors who had been doing prison work for many years, I would be curious to see if they suffered from burnout or if their levels of hope had diminished over time or if the opposite was the case. I believe without hope, it would be very hard to do the job. Perkins and Oser (2014) found a direct link between years in the field for counsellors working in prisons and burnout levels. They discovered that counsellors with more experience had developed healthier mechanisms to cope with the more stressful aspects of the job and that younger counsellors were more susceptible.

Theme three: The personal journey

The draw

I was interested to explore what drew counsellors to work in a prison, what they expected it to be like and what their first impressions of the work were. This interested me as I had always been attracted to the idea of prison work and interested in prisons, as previously mentioned, I have been working in a men's prison for 18 months, enjoying the work immensely. I wondered if other people felt the same way, if they saw their work as a calling and if it met their expectations. No one spoke about seeing their choice to get into prison work as a calling but all the participants talked about having an interest in working with people who had experienced difficulty or trauma in their lives. It is possible that this interest stemmed from their upbringings, either values they picked up from their parents or early experiences which shaped them and gave them an awareness of how others were shaped by their environment.

All participants talked about their parents and the different ways they had influenced their choices, values and ultimately their decision to pursue a career in counselling. Three participants spoke positively about their upbringings and how one or both of their parents had taught them compassion and the importance of listening, they alluded to the fact that this may have influenced their choices to get into counselling. One participant expressed how they had experienced the opposite situation: negative influences in their early life had resulted in them making a decision to take a different path. This finding is consistent with literature that explores the link between early childhood trauma and the choice to work in professions such as social work and counselling. Olson and Royce (2006) and Barnett (2007) discuss the idea of the 'wounded healer' and conclude that therapists and social workers who have had prior painful experiences may have a heightened sensitivity and concern for others' distress that may influence them to pursue a professional helping career. It is interesting to note, I found no literature linking positive childhood experiences to career choice. Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2010) asked participants in their research why they chose to work in a prison and got a variety of answers, for example, "It's connected to my identity" and "It's a calling". It seemed that their choices were not a coincidence for the people interviewed and that prison was part of their internal landscape. As was apparent in this research, participants in Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal's study all linked their work in prison to a sympathetic attitude to marginalized populations in general.

All the participants trained as counsellors later in life so obviously, were older when they started the work at the prison. I cannot find any research related to age of counsellors working in prisons but I can say that in my experience I have found it is something people are drawn to later in life.

Expectations and first impressions

It seems pertinent to note that the interviews didn't result in much data about either what the participants expected prison work to be like or what their first impressions were. This could have been because I didn't ask the right questions or the participants didn't have much to say about this. All of the participants had been doing prison work for at least six years and maybe their recollections of their expectations and first impressions were sparse. However, what the findings did identify was that participants in this study were both scared and excited at the prospect of working in a prison. The reality, for all of them, was shocking for different reasons. They were shocked by the structure of the prison systems and the stories they heard from the clients. I think the fact that all participants were shocked when they first started their work in a prison shows that the reality didn't match their expectations, to a certain extent they didn't know what they were getting themselves into. Christenson (2009) discusses how counsellors starting work in a prison might be surprised by how different the therapeutic environment is from the outside world and how they may be scared at the prospect of the work. She goes on to say that fears diminish once they start the work and realise their clients have the same fears, joys and desires as everyone else. This is reflected in this research with participants saying they were quick to realise there was no need to be fearful:

“the men were like that big kind of scary appearance that really didn't match what was on the inside.”

This research highlights the specific nature of the prison context and how it can be very different from working in more usual environments. Counsellors starting prison work need to be aware of the challenges they will face and the shocking stories they will hear.

Furthermore, if they go into the work expecting it to be rewarding, it appears they will not be disappointed.

The rewards

In support of the literature, all participants in this study identified rewards associated with their work in prisons. They talked about enjoying the connections they made and how they felt these were more powerful in the prison environment. This could be due to the fact that clients were vulnerable and, being able to show them respect and gain their trust was a satisfying process. Ferrera-Pena (2010) said she felt deeply moved by her client's level of engagement and willingness to share extremely painful experiences. Participants in this study said they found the work enriching and rewarding and that they felt useful. Some thought that despite the harsh prison environment, being there, away from their everyday lives gave their clients time to think, gain perspective and grow. Burns (2017) states that change is indeed possible in a custodial setting as it can be less chaotic than the client's normal life; it also gives them the opportunity to detox and consequently see things more clearly. Another reward associated with the work was seeing another side to their clients, one that they did not show to others in that environment. One participant talked about enjoying seeing male clients *"put their staunch down"*. What came through very strongly in this research was, that despite the numerous challenges participants faced in their work with clients in prison, they all felt it was worth it.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This research sought to explore counsellor's experiences of working in prisons, from the counsellor's perspective. I can conclude that the counsellors participating in this study faced many challenges in their work. The first, and seemingly most confronting challenge they faced, was working within the physical environment and systems of the prison. Counsellors struggled with the harsh conditions which were so far from optimal for creating a therapeutic space. They needed to be flexible and open to adjusting their expectations and work styles. The participants found the prison systems frustrating and often felt the systems worked against them and devalued the work they were doing, they often felt isolated and at odds with the way things were structured.

A theme which came through strongly from all participants was the belief that people in prisons should be treated better, more humanely, and that doing so would help them change, grow and move forward in a positive direction. This certainly aligns with research highlighting how prisons in other countries have had huge success when adopting this approach. Baz Dreisinger travelled around the world visiting prisons in Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Jamaica, Thailand, Brazil, Australia, Singapore and Norway. Her book entitled *"Incarceration Nations – A Journey to Justice in Prisons Around the World"* outlines her discoveries and views on carceral practices around the world. She measures success by looking at recidivism and incarceration rates in the countries she visited. What she discovered was that in the countries where the prisons allowed inmates to work, gave them a certain amount of freedom and the environment was more comfortable, recidivism rates

were considerably lower. Norway emerged as the model for the world regarding carceral practices. In Norway, prisons are small and spread all over the country keeping inmates close to families and communities and are designed to resemble life on the outside as much as possible. As outlined in chapter two, prisons in Norway are comfortable and inmates have a relative amount of freedom with some even allowed keys. Norway's prison system is designed to inflict as little pain as possible. It seems the participants in this research would be in favour of New Zealand taking the lead from Norway and making some changes to our carceral practices. They have certainly seen first-hand how a little bit of humanity can make a huge difference.

Another important finding was that the clients had extremely high needs and had frequently experienced a lot of trauma and/or abuse throughout their lives. As a consequence, they often struggled with trust issues. Counsellors working in prisons need to be well informed on how to work with trauma and victims of abuse. Problems with trust were exasperated by the prison environment where inmates had quickly learnt not to trust anyone and treated staff, and other people they came in contact with, with suspicion. It is interesting to note that none of the participants spoke about working with clients of different ethnicities or cultural backgrounds. All of the participants were white and, as mentioned earlier, over 50% of the prison population in New Zealand are Māori. I think I can safely say that all participants would have worked with clients from different ethnic backgrounds to their own, that has certainly been my experience. In this instance, I can only speak for myself in acknowledging an uncomfortableness I have experienced when considering 'white privilege'. This adds to the power imbalance already glaringly obvious in the counsellor/client relationship when working with someone in prison. All participants were

very conscious of this and put a lot of thought into reducing the power imbalance.

Counsellors starting out in this line of work need to be culturally competent and aware of how their position of power may affect the therapeutic alliance.

Following on from this, participants in this study all had very strong opinions about rehabilitation programmes. They felt they were ineffective and, at times, dangerous. The consensus amongst them was that one-to-one counselling was far better and offered a more genuine and safe experience for the client. This finding could be related to the idea that the nature of prisons as places of punishment creates an imbalance of power between staff and inmates. When inmates participate in group programmes, with facilitators employed by the Department of Corrections, they may not feel at ease to open up to people who are working alongside prison officers whose mandate is to control and punish. Participants also discovered that their clients who had been in programmes felt reluctant to talk openly in front of other inmates they then had to live with 24 hours a day. I can draw the conclusion that therapy is more effective when the client has the opportunity to work individually with someone who is not employed by the Department of Corrections and is not writing reports which may affect their parole chances.

Hope is a necessary ingredient in any counselling setting and of particular importance when working in a prison, especially when the client is facing a long sentence and may struggle to see how they will cope. Conversely, when a client is near release and uncertain about how they will manage when they get out and/or nervous about ending up back in prison, having hope for your client, and helping them to have hope is vital. I believe it would be impossible

to work with a client if your own hope for them was non-existent. This was a theory supported by the participants in this study and other research.

Finally, this research revealed that the participants were drawn to counselling later in life often in response to a desire to make a difference and advocate for people who had a hard life. They were all shocked at the way prisons operated and the conditions they had to work in. It seems prison work is challenging for many different reasons and once over the shock factor, counsellors have to adjust the way they work and their expectations of how things will be. Despite this, participants in this study all enjoyed the work immensely and were rewarded through the powerful connections they made with their clients.

Recommendations for further research

The findings of this research add to knowledge in the area of counselling in prisons with a view to getting some perspective on the overall experience for counsellors. It would be interesting to explore inmates' experiences of counselling in prison to see what they found helpful and what could be improved. Further, from the inmates' perspective, with the hope of improving services for inmates, research into the effectiveness of group therapy vs one-to-one therapy would be pertinent. Avenues to consider could also include, safety in groups, building trust, change as a result of therapy and attitudes towards counsellors.

There is a lack of research on relationships between prison staff and people coming into the prison from outside agencies. As this was something which came up in all the interviews, it

would be worthwhile to explore how prison officers perceive counsellors and other support workers coming into prisons.

As Māori make up such a large percentage of the prison population in New Zealand, more research into effective ways of working with Māori in prison would be helpful, particularly from the perspective of Māori inmates.

Research comparing recidivism rates of people who had experienced counselling in prison and people who had not would be valuable. Although, I don't know if recidivism rates are necessarily an accurate measure of the effectiveness of counselling, it depends on what the goals of the therapy were.

Implications for practice

The findings of this research have identified the many challenges counsellors working in prisons face. It could be helpful for counsellors contemplating this work to be aware of the challenges associated with the work and the environment they will be working in. As was outlined in the research, physical conditions in their place of work will not be what they are used to and they may find the conditions frustrating and stressful. A counsellor needs to be prepared to work in adverse situations with high needs clients. Training in working with trauma and PTSD would be advisable before beginning. It could also be prudent to familiarise oneself with the prison before officially starting work to reduce the shock and potential unease, which is a distinct possibility. Counsellors will need to be adaptable and

accepting of the fact that the physical conditions may not be what they are used to and probably not conducive to creating a therapeutic environment.

Prisons are not very therapeutic by nature and establishing a therapeutic alliance may be harder in this environment. Counsellors need to have a more portable therapeutic frame, they will not be able to rely on a soothing, comfortable environment to ensure their client feels relaxed and open. They may need to work harder at establishing trust and breaking down barriers to communication. Following on from this, counsellors are entering a setting where a 'them and us' mentality exists between prison staff and inmates. Counsellors will need to decide where they stand in this situation, how they want to be seen by their clients and what is helpful and unhelpful in reaching their counselling goals.

Counsellors working in prisons need to be culturally competent, particularly around working with Māori. They need to be respectful of cultural differences and open to adapting their ways of communicating to suit their clients.

The importance of hope was highlighted in this research. I would encourage counsellors working with the prison population to be reflexive and consider the role hope plays in their therapy sessions.

The findings also highlighted the many rewards associated with the work. Qualities such as flexibility, openness, self-awareness, cultural awareness, genuineness and an extraordinary ability to be adaptable are paramount to succeed in this role.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet

School of Health Sciences

Email: sjp44@uclive.ac.nz

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: Outside In – Counsellors’ Experiences of Working in Prisons.

I am Susan Panckhurst, the researcher for this project and a student at the University of Canterbury, completing a Master of Counselling. This research project constitutes part of the requirements for this degree in the form of completing a thesis.

The purpose of the project is to research counselling in prisons from the counsellors’ perspectives.

As a participant, your involvement in this project will take the form of a semi-structured interview where I will ask you a number of open ended questions about your work with clients in prison. Our interview will take approximately 1-1.5 hours and will be at the University of Canterbury in an interview room. The interview will be recorded.

I can be contacted on the email address above if you have any further questions or need to contact me about the study.

As a participant in this study you can view the transcript of our interview to ensure that you are happy with it. Should you wish to do this, I will provide a copy for you. The transcript can be amended if you wish.

You may receive a copy of the summary of results at the conclusion of the project by marking the box on the consent form indicating that you would like to receive this.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage. If you withdraw, I will remove information relating to you that is identifiable as data collected

from you prior to draft submission stage. Should you wish to seek counselling as a result of our interview you could contact Petersgate Counselling Centre at 343-3391 in Christchurch or alternatively consult the website www.talkingworks.co.nz , it provides a nationwide directory of professional counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists.

The results of the project will be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms or generic labelling (for example, participant A, participant B, participant C) when transcribing our interview, during the data analysis stage and in any final writing up of the data. It is important that in talking of your experiences as a counsellor, working with clients in prison, that any identifying information about clients is removed from conversation. The prison you are working/worked at will not be named in the writing up of the data and any information which could identify it will be removed.

Data can be accessed only by myself and my academic supervisors Lois Tonkin and Christoph Teschers. Data will be stored in password protected electronic form and/or in securely locked locations and will be destroyed after a period of 5 years post completion of the thesis. A thesis is a public document and will be available publicly through UC library.

This project is being carried out as a requirement for a Master of Counselling by Susan Panckhurst, principal researcher, under the academic supervision of Lois Tonkin, who can be contacted at lois.tonkin@canterbury.ac.nz. She would be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in this project.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete the consent form when we meet.

Many thanks

Susan Panckhurst

Appendix B – Consent Form for Participants

School of Health Sciences

Email: sjp44@uclive.ac.nz

Consent Form for Participants

Project title: Outside In: Counsellors' Experiences of Working in Prisons.

I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.

I understand that participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time in the project without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.

I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher, Susan Panckhurst, and that any published or reported results will not identify me or my place of work. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC library.

I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after 5 years.

I understand that I will be offered a copy of the interview transcript, with real names changed, which I can check and amend if desired. I also understand that I am able to receive a summary of findings of the study by putting my email or postal address in the space provided below.

I understand that I can contact the researcher, Susan Panckhurst, at 0276784239 or sjp44@uclive.ac.nz or her academic supervisor, Lois Tonkin, ph 3695815 ext 95815 or lois.tonkin@canterbury.ac.nz for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name:

Date:

Signature:

I wish to receive a summary of findings: YES / NO

Email:

Or postal address:

Many thanks

Susan Panckhurst

Appendix C – Human Ethics Committee Approval



HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Rebecca Robinson Telephone: +64 03 369 4588, Extn 94588 Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: HEC 2017/133 8 February 2018

Susan Panckhurst School of Health Sciences UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Susan

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal "Outside In - Counsellors' Experiences of Working in Prisons" has been considered and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your emails of 27th November and 11 December 2017, and 5th February 2018.

Best wishes for your project. Yours sincerely

pp.

Professor Jane Maidment

Chair University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee

University of Canterbury Private Bag 4800, Christchurch 8140, New Zealand. www.canterbury.ac.nz